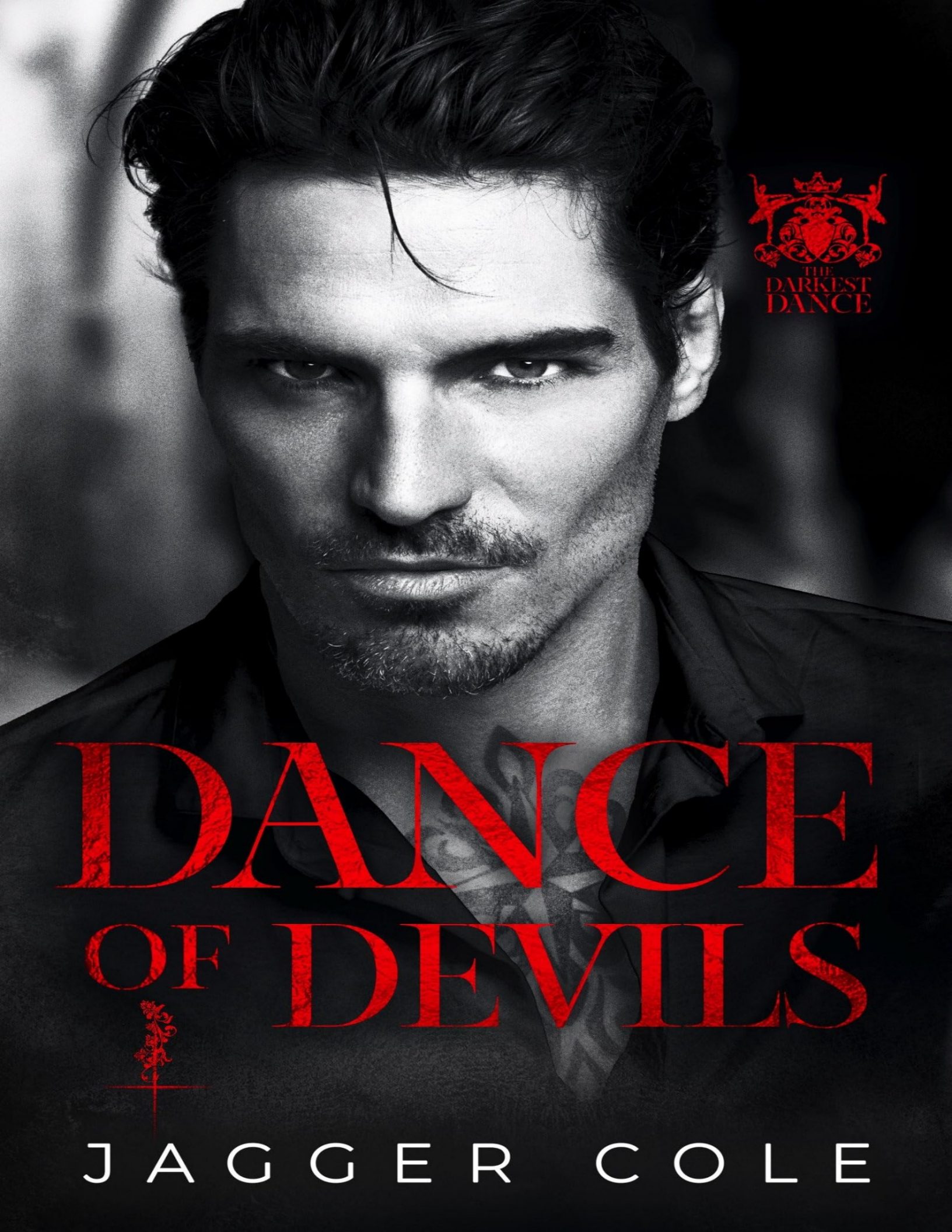
THE DARKEST DANCE
DANCE OF DEVILS
JAGGER COLE

DANCE OF DEVILS

A DARK AGE GAP MAFIA ROMANCE

JAGGER COLE

OceanofPDF.com

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PLAYLIST

Half God Half Devil - In This Moment
Monster - colby!, Shaya Zamora
Come As You Are - Nirvana
Devil I Know - Allie X
Gangsta - Kehlani
I Wanna Be Yours - Arctic Monkeys
Wicked Games - Wolf Alice
older - Isabel LaRosa
if u think i'm pretty - Artemas
Like It Like That - Gangsta Beatz
Lokaðu Augunum - Ólafur Arnalds
Arm's Length - Sam Fender
Lost Horse - Asaf Avidan
Take Me To Church - Hozier
Closer - Kings of Leon
MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT - Elley Duhé
Believer - Imagine Dragons
Do I Wanna Know? - Arctic Monkeys
War Of Hearts - Ruelle
Something In The Way - Nirvana
Hello Heaven, Hello - YUNGBLUD
Not Afraid Anymore - Halsey
Cravin' - Stiletto, Kendyle Paige
Secret - Sleeping Wolf

Slow Dancing in a Burning Room - John Mayer
I Want To - Rosenfeld
Radio Ballet - Eluvium
Spitting Off the Edge of the World - Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Perfume Genius
Desire - Ryan Adams

Listen to the playlist on Spotify!

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TRIGGER WARNING

Dear Reader,

This book, like many of my books, contains darker, graphic themes. *Dance of Devils* involves mild BDSM, mild degradation and praise, impact play, mentions of suicide and self harm, SA and physical abuse, and references to past CSA and trauma.

While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. *Please* know your own triggers and limits, and read with that in mind.

Thanks for reading,

Jagger

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1

BROOKLYN

WHEN YOU'RE POOR, the days have a way of blending together.

They say time flies when you're having fun. But when your task for the next twenty-four hours, over and over on a hellish repeat, is merely to *survive*, time becomes the enemy. It represents meals you have to source. Logistics you have to figure out…where to shower, where to brush your teeth, where to pee.

Time is measured in long, terror-filled nights hiding in the back seat of your car, only half-asleep in case someone tries to break in, or the cops show up and start hassling you.

You have to figure out ways of staying creative and keeping the lies going. Find reasons for never inviting your close friends over to your place.

…Because you don't *have* one.

It wasn't always like this, of course. My life has never been mistaken for a Hallmark movie, and I doubt anyone has ever envied it, but at least it used to be a few notches above "living out of a 2001 Honda Accord".

But that was before Mom died. Before my stepfather lost the uphill battle of trying to raise a kid who wasn't his and who he'd only known for two years. Before I got swallowed into the system and ping ponged from one horror-show of a foster home to another, until I turned sixteen and legally emancipated myself.

Before the banks and the less reputable “lenders” came calling about Mom’s debts and took everything, and life became one long, slow losing streak.

My money. My dignity. Finally, a year ago, my apartment.

That's when Pearl—i.e., my Honda—and I first became acquainted. And as much as I love her, she can be a *real* finicky cunt when she wants sometimes.

“Goddamnit, *go*, bitch,” I mutter, gritting my teeth and trying the ignition again.

When I was nine, I was in a particularly hellish foster home on Staten Island. He was a monster—Mr. Morris, I mean. But on the plus side, *Mrs.* Morris played piano for a local dance school. And as terrified as she was of her husband, she’d come alive when she was sitting at that piano, with the little girls in pink satin moving in perfect union at the barre behind her.

She took me with her one day—I don't know if it was a way of getting me away from Mr. Morris’s temper and day drinking, or if she really thought I'd enjoy it. But that’s all it took.

One day.

One ballet class.

I was fucking *hooked*.

And fourteen years later, here I am.

Living out of a nearly-vintage car notwithstanding, I’m doing awesome, professionally speaking. The Zakharova—the company I dance with here in New York—is recognized as one of the greatest in the world.

It’s tough, brutal work. But what dreams are worth it in the end, if it’s not challenging to get there?

The only problem is, ballet as a career pays *sweet fuck all*.

Add in the money I keep sending Derrick’s lawyer for the appeals process, and voila: my current living situation.

“Fuck *off*,” I grunt at Pearl, jamming the key back in and twisting as I stomp on the brake pedal.

Pearl mutters and complains and possibly passes gas before she stops again.

Fuck.

I glance around. Mercifully, the quietish side street in Murray Hill that I’ve been parked on for the last few nights is devoid of walkers. I take a slow breath, glancing at the back seat, which has now been transformed back into a messy car from a cozy bed.

Pro tip: messy shitbox cars don’t get broken into or cased. Cars that look like someone’s living in them do.

I run a hand over the steering wheel and then pat it encouragingly.

“Girl, it’s been four days. You know the rules. Time to move. I’m thinking Hell’s Kitchen for the next few nights? Maybe West 46th and 9th, near the Galaxy Diner?” I take a deep breath and pat the dashboard. “And to do that, you need to clear off the stink face, get the sand out of your vagina, and *start*. Okay?”

I pump the gas pedal three times. No idea if that actually works, but I vaguely remember Derrick swearing by it when I was little. Then I take another breath, hold it, slip the key back in, close my eyes, and turn.

With a sputter and a violent belch of blue-gray exhaust, Pearl wheezes to life.

“That’s my fucking *girl*!” I crow. “That’s what I’m fucking *talking about*! Who’s a sexy little bitch?!” I cackle like a lunatic. “You! *You’re* a sexy little bitch, Pearl!”

“Oh yes you *are*, girl!”

I jolt, whirling to see two guys in mesh tops and eyeliner, hand-in-hand, who are clearly on their way *home* from their night out at five-fifteen in the morning.

They grin at me with drug or alcohol-fueled smiles. The one with snow-white dyed hair untangles himself from his partner and cocks a hip.

“Yas! Pearl, girl, you are a motherfucking *queen*. Go *get* today, bitch!”

Okay, they think *I’m* Pearl, and that I was just giving myself the world’s cringiest pep talk ever in my shitty little car.

Which must look *tragically* pathetic, when I think about it.

I flash them a weak smile. “Thanks!”

“Make it the day you deserve, Pearl!” the other guy calls after me as I shift Pearl into gear and pull away from the curb.

The day I deserve. I’m not sure I’m a believer in karma or fate or any higher power, but if I was, I’d ask whoever the fuck is in charge what I ever did to get the hand I've been dealt.

Was I a serial killer in my previous life? Or the person who decided women’s pants weren’t allowed to have pockets?

Whatever.

I head over to Hell’s Kitchen. Unlimited, un-metered parking spots in New York are few and far between, and I’m not the only person out here living out of their car. So I want to get to my new location and score a spot before the morning rush hour starts getting insane.

“Hey.”

I start to get out of Pearl, and glance up to see a woman mean-eyeing me as she steps out from between two buildings. She looks close to forty, but in the year I’ve spent homeless in this city, I’ve learned that the streets age you. She might just be a few years older than my twenty-three.

Regardless, she looks pissed as hell.

“I was saving that spot.”

My brows knit. “Sorry?”

“That parking spot,” she spits. “My man is heading over with the van. That’s our spot.”

I force a politely confused smile to my face, even though I know exactly what she's talking about.

"Well, I have to get to work, so—"

She starts to laugh. "Please. I can spot people like me a mile away." She steps closer, walking around the front of Pearl. I'm still only halfway out of the driver's seat. "Let me give you some advice, sweet cheeks," she says. "One, you're trying too hard with that shit in the back." She nods past me at the mess that I strew across the back seat when I'm parking Pearl.

"Normies walk by and see a shitty car. People like us?" She grins a rotten-toothed, meth-y smile. "We see something might be worth breaking into. Got it?"

I swallow tightly. "Got it."

"Second piece of advice."

Fear jolts through me as she suddenly flicks her wrist, revealing a vicious-looking switchblade. Her eyes bore into mine.

"Get the *fuck* out of my parking space."

My shoulders sag.

Shit.

Twenty minutes later, I've miraculously managed to find another non-metered spot, but now the clock is ticking.

I wolf down a stale Pop Tart to ease my hunger pangs as I wait for the crosstown bus to hit up the nearest Fit World location.

The Mercury Theater, which houses the Zakharova, has a world-class gym facility in the basement. But I'm not at Fit World to work out.

I'm here for their shower and the bathroom.

And I'm not the only one.

Five-forty-five in the morning draws two distinctly different crowds to the budget-friendly, austere Fit World women's locker room. First you have the

women who are actually here to work out. But, this is *Fit World*, not a real, serious gym: people come here because it's seven bucks a month for a membership, which gets you access to their thirty locations across the city.

No idea how the fuck they make money that way, but not my problem.

My problem is the second group of women who come here before six in the morning, i.e., people like *me*.

Most are great. The unhoused aren't looking to start shit or draw any more attention to themselves than they have to. Invisibility is key to survival. But the health care system being what it is, many of them are also…well…

"Bitch, you go in that stall and I will fucking cut your tits off."

I tense with one hand on the stall door open and whip my head around to glance behind me. The woman is twice my size…which isn't hard, but still. She's big. She's terrifying-looking. She's also muttering what might legit be spells under her breath as she sways unsteadily on her feet and gazes at me with unfocused eyes.

"You hear what I said, motherfucker?!"

"Yeah, I…" I swallow, feeling a few eyes in the locker room on me, though no one wants to get in the middle of this shit, and I don't blame them.

The woman glaring at me is clearly mentally unwell. And while I empathize, I have no idea if she's about to walk away and forget I even exist, or charge me and try to bite me.

"I just have to pee really badly," I murmur, squeezing my legs together. "I'll only be—"

I back up until I hit the frame of the stall when she storms into my personal space.

"That is *my* fucking toilet!!" she screams right in my face.

"Okay, okay," I blurt, edging out from between her and the stall and then ducking away from her, my hands up. "My mistake."

“That’s *right*,” she barks, shaking her head as she storms into the stall and slams the door shut.

One woman gives me a small, comforting smile and a raised brow as if to say “You good?” I nod. She nods back. Then we both return to our morning ablutions.

I pee, then rinse off quickly, brushing my teeth in the shower stall. I’ll wash my hair after rehearsal, before my shift at my other job. I could always shower before rehearsal, at the theater, but I don’t like to make a habit of it.

My friends are the greatest, and I know they’d never shame me for my current life situation. Actually, they’d probably fall over each other asking me to move in with one of them.

But pride is a motherfucker. And I *hate* accepting handouts.

An hour later, as I head toward the back alley behind The Mercury lugging my ratty old dance bag, I shake off the last of “homeless Brooklyn” and take a breath, slipping my mask into place.

I am now officially “ballet Brooklyn”.

Here, I feel safe. I’m snarky and fun and impulsive, I can let my guard down, and let the love and warmth of my amazing friends lift me up. And here, I’m a *damn* good dancer.

At least, I’d better be. Because in a few months, I might not be “here” at all —in New York, that is.

I might be dancing for the *Ballet Imperiya Korona*; the Imperial Crown Ballet, in Moscow—one of the most prestigious ballet companies in the world.

I scowl at myself for a second.

No, not “I might” be dancing in Moscow. *Manifest, girl*.

I *will* be.

I will—

“Lemme guess, your phone doesn’t work anymore?”

All I see is black dotted with red. All I feel is the raw thud of pain exploding outward from where the back of James's hand has smacked my left temple.

My vision blurs, my breath sticking in my throat as I spin off-balance, stumbling and only just catching myself against the wall of a building. I've barely begun to turn to face him before James grabs me by the front of my hoodie, hauling me up and snarling down into my face.

"I called you five fucking times the other day."

There's no right answer here. If I say "I know", I'm admitting that I ignored the calls, which will make him even angrier. If I say that I *didn't* know, then I'm an idiot. This will also piss him off.

I understand, all too well, the way abusers like James twist reality to make everything your fault. They scream at you because *you* did or said something wrong. They hit you—even though they "don't want to"—because you *made them*.

I've read the books. I've listened to the rah-rah-sisterhood podcasts. I *know* all that.

It doesn't stop me from cowering in fear under my ex-boyfriend's leering, cruel gaze, feeling like I need to apologize for something.

"I…I'm sorry," I mumble feebly. "I—James, I've just been really busy—"

"That's not our deal, Brooklyn."

Our *deal*.

Something inside me withers and cringes.

James and I dated, broke up, then dated again, then broke up again—it goes on like that for the last year and change.

It's a broken record, and I know every note by heart now.

I, obviously, have issues—with trust and intimacy, with my self-worth, with abandonment. Daddy issues, mommy issues, you name it, I've got them all.

And James knows it.

The script is nauseatingly familiar. He enters or *re-enters* my life when I'm spiraling particularly badly. He says all the right things to assuage every "issue" I have and make me lower my defenses—partly because I'm pathetic, and partly because I am just *so fucking desperate* for something real. For someone who will hold me tight and fix it all. Chase away the monsters. Banish the nightmares.

That isn't James. But when the world's had you under its boot-heel this long, even a flickering mirage of what you need feels like enough.

And so I decide to let him back into my life. He plays it cool for a while, acts like he gives a shit about me, and for one flickering moment, I wonder if he's turned a corner, and that *this time*, he'll really be what I so desperately need him to be.

…And that's when the nice act drops.

When he lets his temper out. When everything becomes my fault. When I can never say the right thing.

Next come the punches and the kicks. The backhands, the slaps, the shoves.

…The blood and tears when he no longer listens to the word no, and just takes what he wants anyway.

Finally I tell him it's over, that I hate him and never want to see him again, and manage to get away.

And at some point after *that*, my soul breaks a little more, and my defenses drop, and the whole sad, pathetic, abusive dance starts again.

"I wanted you to come over the other night," he growls.

I swallow. "James, look, we talked about that. I don't think we should—"

My breath catches and pain radiates through my arm as he grabs my elbow tightly and squeezes.

"I fucking *told you*," he growls. "Look, I understand you don't want to date me anymore. I know I get carried away sometimes."

The only reason I don't laugh is because I'm terrified.

“I agreed to no more dating. But I never agreed to stop *completely*.” He leers into my face, his teeth flashing. “You know how it is, B. I start thinking about you…”

I turn to stone as his fingers trail up my arm.

“Start thinking about *us*…”

Nausea coils in my stomach as he slides a finger over the side of my breast through my hoodie, slipping his hand to my waist and squeezing.

Please go away. Please leave me alone.

“So when I tell you to come over, baby--”

“Brooklyn!”

I whirl away from James and yank myself out of his grip so quickly that I surprise even myself.

Behind me, down the street toward the entrance to the alley behind the Mercury where we all hang out before rehearsal, I see Val walking toward me.

“That better be the fucking gay one,” James seethes.

Now feels like the wrong time to remind him that Val is in fact *bi*.

There’s also the small detail that James and I are *not* a couple, and who I spend time with, men or women, is none of his fucking business.

But that would be an even worse thing to say right now.

“I…I have to go,” I blurt. “Rehearsal starts soon—”

“Fine,” he growls. His eyes narrow onto mine. “But next time I fucking call you, *you pick up*, yeah?”

I gulp, not able to meet his gaze.

“Brooklyn!” he snaps. “Did you hear me?”

“Yeah,” I say quietly. “I heard you.”

“Good,” he mutters. “You know how I fucking hate waiting when my dick gets hard for you, baby.”

I turn to ice as he grabs my elbow again.

“Don’t make me wait again, B,” he hisses. “Or I’ll come find you.” He grins lecherously. “Shit, maybe that would make you come even harder.”

I’ve never once come with James.

Also not something to mention right now.

By the time Val gets to where I’m still frozen on the sidewalk, James has disappeared around the corner.

“Who the fuck was that?” my friend frowns.

I somehow manage to force a smile to my face.

“Oh, you know,” I snort, rolling my eyes for effect. “Just some guy.”

Val grins widely. “*Ayyy*, that’s my girl,” he chuckles, pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and slipping one between his perfectly sculpted lips. “Look at Ms. Thang over here, just walking down the street catching number.”

I roll my eyes again. “C’mon,” I sigh, slipping the mask back into place. Covering the fear. Covering the dirty, raw, unclean Brooklyn that I can’t let anyone see, least of all my friends. “We’re going to be late.”

* * *

THE REHEARSAL DAY goes by in a blur. I have some time to kill before I need to get to my other job, so I end up hanging in the back alley with Val, Naomi, Milena, and Evie for a while. Then I shower, actually washing my hair this time, and get dressed before hightailing it to the subway.

An hour later, I’m getting off the G train at Greenpoint Ave. I hustle my way through the trendier streets of Greenpoint until the hipster beer bars and coffeeshops give way to warehouses and broken streetlights.

I round the last corner and pause for a second across the street from The Mirage, taking in the flickering neon sign over the building announcing “GIRLS GIRLS GI-LS”with a missing R, the parking lot full of sleek street racing cars, and lots of motorcycles.

Like I said, ballet pays *shit*. And being poor is, ironically, expensive. So are Derrick’s legal bills. And while working at a cocktail bar, café, or anywhere else where I’d keep my fucking clothes on sounds nice, they also don’t pay enough.

Stripping does.

There are closer places to take my clothes off for money than Greenpoint, obviously. But when I was thinking about taking the plunge and dancing on a fucking pole a little over a year ago, Val brought me out with some of his friends for someone’s birthday, and we all ended up at Centerfolds in Midtown.

That’s the night I realized I had to choose a place further out, where nobody who might know me might accidentally blunder in.

Like The Mirage.

The place is a sticky, grimy shithole, the clientele are usually rough, and Lou, the owner-manager, is…

A predator.

A shiver ripples down my back as I inhale deeply and start to cross the street.

But the money is great, and some of the girls I’ve met here, like Maya, are amazing.

The sound of a door banging open and men laughing loudly yanks my attention away from the club and to one of the warehouses. Two guys stumble out from what sounds like a party inside, swigging beers as they unzip and pee against the side of the building.

“Fastest grand I ever made,” one of them laughs. “That was a quick fucking fight, bro.”

Ahhh, okay. Not a party. A fight club. I don't know who hosts these things, but they've had them at the warehouse across the street from The Mirage a couple of times before.

I turn away to walk toward the employee entrance at the back of the club.

"Hey! Cherry!"

It's not a name I hear outside the club. "Cherry", as in "Cherry Pie", is my name *in there*. Out here, I'm still Brooklyn.

So the unexpectedness of hearing that name yanks my head around before I can stop myself.

Instantly, my stomach drops.

I recognize the four finance bros from last night—they were in with a buddy for his bachelor party. The groom-to-be got a little too drunk, and was sloppy trying to hide the fact that he was doing bumps of coke when he thought we weren't looking, but he *behaved*.

He got two lap dances from Maya and one from Em, and that was it.

His friends, however—these fuckers—took it too far.

You'd think by now that everyone knows the unspoken rules of a strip club. No, the stripper's name isn't her real name. When she tells you "her *real* name," no, that's not it either.

She truly *isn't* going to fuck you, no matter how much cash you throw at her.

But that's the game. The girls flirt and take their clothes off, and the guys' horny monkey brains get them to empty their wallets…until it's *time to go home*.

These four didn't get the memo about that, though. Last night, these assholes thought the money thrown at me meant they owned me, that they'd bought my body. They got handsy to the point they got kicked the fuck out.

It takes *a lot* for Lou to kick someone out of The Mirage.

Fear ripples through me as one of them narrows his eyes at me—the one who was especially vocal last night about his opinion that cash meant he could fuck me. But I force a soft smile to my lips.

Kill them with kindness, as Maya always says. *Stroke the male fucking ego*.

That's not a subservient thing. It's a survival mechanism.

"Hey, guys." I flash a wider grin. "You're back! I'm just starting work now, so if you head in, I'll be on stage in about forty-five—"

"I don't think so, whore."

The word hits me like a slap, and I suddenly realize just how mean the looks on their faces are.

"Look, guys…" I force another smile as I edge toward the back door of the club. "I think everyone had a bit too much fun last night, huh? Listen, I'll talk to the owner. He's a friend."

No he's fucking not.

"And I'm sure we can put last night behind us if you want to come in again—"

"That's not why we're fucking here," another of them growls, his eyes vicious.

"You took three fucking grand off us last night," the leader spits.

Yep, I walked with three thousand dollars last night.

…Which I promptly handed over to Diego, Derrick's lawyer, when I met him at a bar down the street from where Pearl was parked for the night.

"You guys were *amazing* yesterday evening," I grin. "Seriously, thank you. I'm glad you had fun! But really, I gotta head in—"

The one to the right of the ringleader moves faster than I would have expected. Just as I turn for the door, he rushes me, making me flinch away. He storms past me and blocks the door, crossing his arms menacingly over his chest.

“Okay, guys—”

“Three fucking *grand*, you fucking cunt,” the leader mutters. “And none of us even got our dicks wet.”

My jaw grinds as anger surges through me.

“That’s because I’m a *dancer*,” I snap. “Not a whore.”

I can feel my pulse thudding as I glance at the guy behind me, fear crawling up my spine before I turn back to the other three.

“Well, we’ve been talking,” the leader goes on, grinning darkly. “And to us, it’s not that cut and dried. We figure we were promised a service that we never got. A service *we paid for*.”

“No one promised you shit!” I snap. “Girls take their tits out and dance, you throw money. That’s the transaction. Have you seriously never been to a strip club before?”

It’s like raising my voice to James. Pure, dark rage spreads over his face—the type you only see in men’s eyes when it’s focused on a woman they think is beneath them, or who owes them something.

“Fuck that,” he snarls. “It was pretty fucking heavily implied.”

“I think you should leave,” I blurt.

He grins and glances at his buddies, who all start chuckling.

“Not happening.” He takes a step toward me. “Not until we’ve all had a *turn*.”

It’s gut instinct, plus seeing the threat written so clearly in his eyes, that has me whirling and *bolting*.

Fear denotes like a bomb in my chest as I run headlong through the parking lot. I’m in sneakers and a skirt, they’re in dress pants and office shoes. But I hear them pounding the pavement behind me as I veer out the back end of the lot and sprint across the road.

There’s a 24-hour diner up the street. If I can zigzag between the warehouses, I can—

The scream rips from my throat but instantly dies on my lips as a sweaty palm clamps over my mouth. A heavy body slams into me from behind, dragging me to the ground. My knees skid across concrete, pain slicing through me as my palms hit next, wrenching a cry from my mouth.

My skull crashes into the concrete, and I blink as my stomach heaves and my vision clouds.

“Yeah, bro!”

“Fuck *yeah*, dude!”

I’m dazed and floundering, kicking my legs and doing my best to lash out. But there’s four of them, all on me at once, holding me down, pinning my wrists and ankles and shoving a piece of fabric into my mouth.

My t-shirt is torn from my neck down to my navel.

Hands paw at my breasts. Others yank up my skirt.

Please, no.

Please don’t—

“*Uuuggghfff!*”

It happens instantly. One moment, the clawing, molesting hands are trying to yank off my bra and underwear, the sound of belt buckles jangling like the clash of knives in my ears.

The next second, all four guys are flying off me like they’ve been hit by a bus.

I start to struggle to my feet. But one of the guys stumbles backward, screaming, slamming into me and taking us both down. I try to push him off me, still screaming into the gag in my mouth. His head lolls to the side, and I see his face.

Holy fuck.

He’s out cold, blood dripping freely from a bashed-in nose and wrecked mouth.

I scream into the gag again, kicking and scrabbling away from the unconscious guy. Another cry rips my attention past him, and suddenly, I'm not moving at all.

I'm too stunned for that.

There's a…*something*…fighting all three of them. I want to say it's a man, but he's everywhere at once. He's dressed all in black, with his back to me, which makes him appear more monster than human.

The second finance bro goes down. Then the third. The fourth turns and tries to bolt, but the man in black suddenly reaches down, grabs a hunk of broken tarmac, and hurls it at him.

The guy grunts as the rock hits the back of his head, sending him to the ground.

Everything is throbbing. The world is spinning under my hands and feet as I push myself away from the dark shape. The rag has fallen out of my mouth, but I still can't make a sound, not one that would be heard over the roaring pulse in my ears anyway.

The figure in black turns to me as my vision begins to fade.

The world lurches in various directions as my arms give out, dropping me back to the ground.

The figure walks closer and then crouches down beside me. Through the haze, through the fear, through the darkness swallowing me whole, I look up…

Into dark, black, devil eyes.

Then it all fades away.

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2

KIR

WITH A BURST OF FURY, my arm shoots out and my fist connects with sweat-slicked flesh. My opponent grunts, and his eyes roll back a little behind the mask covering the top half of his face.

I have one covering mine, too.

But he recovers *instantly*, and this time, it's me who groans when he swings at my now-unprotected midsection.

Fuck.

The wind slams out of my lungs as the motherfucker pounds me in the upper abs, just below my rib cage.

Common sense would dictate that *now* might be a good time to call this. After all, masks or not, I'm fairly sure—based on his ability, the liquor on his breath, and the massive horned bull tattoo on his chest—who my opponent in the underground ring is tonight.

All the more reason to call it quits.

Roman Nikitin has a few inches and about twenty pounds of solid muscle on me. Not to mention, he's about fifteen years younger. I'm starting to get fatigued from all the punches, meanwhile this guy is just getting warmed up.

Besides, I don't really give a shit about any of this.

Not about the bets still being placed by the screaming crowd around us. I've got money riding on this fight, too, because why not. But at this point in my life, I could care less about that part.

I've got more money than I could spend in ten lifetimes. I could lose a *fortune* on this fight and not even notice.

Same goes for the "glory". I'm no stranger to the whisperings of one's ego when it comes to combat. I've been fighting since I was literally a child. The streets of Moscow taught me that pride and honor are things you're not allowed to lose, even if you don't win. Then, later, six years in Zavolzhsky Penal Camp Eighteen in Siberia taught me that winning is *everything*, because to lose is to die.

Both are a bit different from the refereed, gloved, "fight only until a tap-out" ring I'm currently in. But still—when you're ready to give in, you dig deeper to find fear or hatred…any emotion you can forge into anger, which in turn fuels the fury.

Today it doesn't take much digging.

All I have to do is think of Dimitri.

Do we have a deal, Mr. Nikolayev?

Even if my knuckles weren't currently throbbing, my hand would still feel the sting of the handshake from earlier today, cementing that *deal*.

Ostensibly, my new agreement with Dimitri Moskovic is a mutually beneficial one. After something like four decades of conflict between our families, Dimitri and I have finally come to a ceasefire agreement, with, quite honestly, completely reasonable terms.

No more rivalry. No more violence. No more continuing the stupid fight that our fathers started long before either of us was running our respective empires. Hell, before they could even be *called* "empires".

There's just one problem.

My lips curl as I suck in a ragged breath of air. Sweat trickles down my bare chest. I hear the jeers and roars of the men around us. Feel the muscles and

tendons of my arm and shoulder contract as I turn the anger in me into fury and fuel.

Roman—well, probably Roman—grunts when I explode into him, my right cross slamming into his jaw and almost knocking the fucker off his feet.

The problem with this perfectly reasonable agreement between Dimitri and me?

It's *me*. And I am not, most of the time, a reasonable *man*.

I don't want an *equitable* resolution. I want conquest. Victory. I want to *win*.

A lion doesn't have any interest in making an *arrangement* with a wild boar for future food deliveries on a schedule. It wants to tear that fucking pig in half and bathe in its blood so that the whole jungle remembers who is king.

I don't care that this deal basically boils down to Dimitri staying out of the U.S., me staying out of Russia, and me using my connections to help his daughter, Inessa, get into the ultra-elite *Ballet Imperiya Korona*.

It's not like anyone's cutting any big checks, or giving up important territory. I barely visit my country of birth anymore, and the business I conduct there is inconsequential. The same goes for whatever small pies Dimitri has his fingers in here in New York.

So why the actual *fuck* do I feel cheated? Like the lion being forced to make a handshake deal with his dinner?

Roman…or whoever…shakes off my hit, rolling his neck with his teeth bared and his fists up. But just then, we're saved by the proverbial bell.

DING-DING-DING!

That's five rounds, which is the limit imposed on tonight's fights. There are other fights that these promotors throw which *do not* have limits of any kind, but that's not really my scene. I prefer *living*, personally.

My opponent and I, both of us sucking in air, touch gloves with curt nods before retreating to our respective corners. Around us the crowd is in an uproar, screaming and roaring to collect bets or pay out on their spreads.

I use my teeth to rip the tape off, then slide the gloves off my swollen hands.

“Not bad, old man.”

I smirk as I turn to it’s-definitely-Roman, now also sans gloves, standing before me in my corner of the ring.

“I would have thought your father would have instilled in you more respect for one’s elders, Mr. Nikitin.”

He bristles visibly when I call him by name.

“There are *rules* here, Kir,” he snarls. “Hence the masks.”

“Well,” I smile at him, “you’d know more about masks and underground cloak and dagger skullduggery than me.”

That earns me another sharp glare.

Roman, together with four other young underworld kings and princes of New York, make up something called The Black Court. It’s all very dramatic, in my opinion: animal masks, an underground lair, the adjudicated “guilty” party being given a choice of literally fighting one of the five for a chance at freedom, or else *running* from one of them through some underground labyrinth they have.

Again, it’s all *very* over the top, and really not that interesting to me.

However, most of them seem to think I’ve got an ax to grind with the Court. That I’ve got some sort of “get off my lawn” old-guy mentality and a deep distrust for their brand of vigilante underworld justice.

They’re wrong. I honestly couldn’t give a fuck what Roman and his little friends do. So long as they stay away from me and my business, they can fight or chase whoever the fuck they want.

That said… I *really* enjoy fucking with them. And Roman, with his quick temper, is a ridiculously easy mark.

“We’re ready for you any time you want to stop creeping around the shadows and come at us face-on, old man,” Roman growls, nodding as

someone passes him a beer I'm positive he doesn't need.

"A supremely gracious invitation, Mr. Nikitin," I sigh in a bored tone, rubbing a towel over my chest. "I'll have to tell my assistant to RSVP for me sometime."

Roman downs half his beer and levels a cold look my way. "We have a problem we need to sort out now, old man?"

"We will if you keep calling me *old man*," I say through a tight smile.

I'm forty-four, not eighty-seven, for fuck's sake. And I just fought the little cunt to a draw, so…

Roman drains the rest of his beer and then taps me in the chest belligerently with the bottom of the bottle.

"You keep looking for a fight, Kir, and you're going to—"

"Yes, well, this has been *very* engaging, Mr. Nikitin," I sigh in a bored tone. "But as thrilling a conversation as this is, I've gotten what I came for, and it's time for me to leave."

"That was a *draw*," he growls at my back as I turn away. "Not a win. In case you were confused."

I smile blandly as I turn back. "Oh, I didn't come here to win."

I came here to shake loose some of the fury rattling around inside of me after my "agreement" with Dimitri. To that end, mission fucking accomplished.

I really should try actual therapy someday.

I push my way through the sweating crowd to where I left my shirt and jacket neatly folded over the back of a chair.

Tonight was a packed house. Not an empty seat in the whole place—except for this one. No one tried to sit here, for the same reason my shirt and jacket are exactly where I left them, completely undisturbed.

Masks or not, everyone here knows who the fuck I am.

I finish toweling off my chest and shoulders, slip my mask off, run my fingers through my dark hair, and pull on my shirt. The jacket is next, my shoulders flexing as I slip it on.

A few handshakes and a couple of “always good to see you, Mr. Nikolayev”s later, I’m walking out the side door into the New York night.

The sweltering, locker-room stink of the warehouse dissipates as the relatively cool city air washes over me. I roll my neck and crack my knuckles, and I’m heading back to my car when something catches my attention and doesn’t let go.

It’s ironic that tonight’s fight happened to be held here, at a warehouse directly across the street from The Mirage strip club.

Dimitri owns the Mirage. At least, he will until the terms of our agreement go into effect six months from now and he’s forced to sell it. But it’s not Dimitri’s flickering neon sign advertising “GIRLS GIRLS GI-LS”—as if there’s *any* confusion about what goes on in that shithole—that captures my attention.

It’s the young woman.

From here, she’s just another blonde in a skirt and t-shirt, half turned away from me, holding what looks like a ratty old gym bag to her chest. But I’m not looking at her because she’s caught my male attention.

I’m looking at her because she’s currently surrounded by four fucking hyenas.

Finance douchebags, by the looks—all Dockers and polo shirts and watches they can only afford if that long-shot short position of theirs pays off by the next quarterly meeting at Black Rock, or Ironclad Holdings, or whatever other fucking hedge fund they work at.

The definitely don’t look like they belong outside a neon dump like The Mirage, circling the girl like carrion birds.

Whatever this is, it doesn’t look…friendly.

It *also* doesn’t look like my business. So I turn away with my keys out, ready to feel the rev of my Aston Martin DBS Superleggera, listen to some Nirvana on full volume through the speakers, and *go the fuck home*.

It’s her scream that stops me.

Not the shriek of a damsel in distress. It’s more like a battle cry as she prepares herself for war. But when I turn back to the scene behind the strip club, I don’t see a battle.

I see hyenas chasing prey.

The girl is running through the back parking lot, dropping her bag at some point as she dashes across the street. The jackals stay right behind her, closing in fast.

My jaw tenses. My muscles coil. My hands curl back into fists, like they were earlier.

One of them tackles her to the concrete of an old, beaten-up parking lot, and the rest of them pile on.

I don’t even realize I’m running until I’m almost on top of them. I’m unaware of crossing two streets and another parking lot until I’m milliseconds away from crashing right into them.

Which is exactly what I proceed to do.

The motherfuckers have her clothes half ripped off, but scatter like fucking bowling pins when I slam into them with a guttural roar. After that, it’s not even a fight, even though there are four of them.

One, they’re apparently a bunch of pussies. And two, there’s a fury in my blood I’m not even sure I felt back there in the ring with Roman.

The first one crumples when I break his nose and smash his front teeth in for good measure. I hit him again, because why the fuck not, and this time, the light dims in his eyes before I throw him back and turn to his friends.

Down goes another. Then the third, as he’s turning to run like the little bitch he is.

The fourth shitbag actually *does* start to run away. But he doesn't make it ten steps before the hunk of broken tarmac I throw at him hits him squarely in the back of the head, shutting that down.

I have half a mind to line the four of them up and execute them right fucking here. But before I can think through the logistics of committing quadruple homicide, a soft, broken, *heartbreaking* whimper comes from behind me.

I turn, and my eyes finally land on the girl.

Christ, they did a number on her. I move toward her, my teeth grinding tighter with every step. Blood covers half her face, her long blonde hair matted into it covering the other half.

I avoid looking at her bare breasts, her ripped shirt and half torn-off bra. She makes a small move to push her skirt back down over her underwear. As I get closer to her, her eyes snap to mine, bright, crystal blue. Even through the pain, the tears, and the blood.

But when they lock with mine as I start to kneel down next to her, something dims in them and she collapses utterly, like her body's just… given up.

The rational thing to do back in the ring was to *stop* fighting the big motherfucker fifteen years my junior. Same as the rational thing to do *now* would be to call an ambulance, or the police—or both—to make sure she gets the help she needs.

But tonight must be a night for irrational behavior, because before I know what I'm doing, before I can tell myself not to get involved, I'm sliding my arms under her limp body and scooping her off the dirty, hard ground.

Fucking hell, she weighs nothing at all as I cradle her against my chest.

Yeah, fuck waiting for the cops or an ambulance to get all the way out here.

She's coming with me.

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3

KIR

SHE'S like a paper doll in my arms as I carry her to the Aston Martin.

"*My…bag…*"

I pause mid-step, surprised when I hear her voice against my chest. Barely there. Hardly a whisper.

"Don't worry about that," I growl as I quicken my step. "I'm going to help you."

"*Bag…*" she croaks again. "*Pearl…needs me.*"

My brow furrows. I have no idea who Pearl is. But clearly, she's important to her, and the bag is somehow part of it.

So fuck it.

I make a slight detour, backtracking to where her bag is still lying in the middle of the street behind The Mirage. I easily hold her with one arm as I reach down to pick the tattered old thing up. For one horrible second, I wonder if Pearl is a fucking *pet* that she had in there. But a quick glance puts that idea to rest.

At the car, I gently get her settled in the passenger seat and buckle her in, her precious bag at her feet. She's unconscious again, her face still too matted with blood and hair for me to see it clearly. But I let my gaze drag over the rest of her.

Then I shrug off my jacket and cover her nudity.

Not that she doesn't have *exquisite* tits. But this is hardly the time or place.

My brows knit as I skim my eyes over her again.

Sneakers. Slightly punk skirt. A plain white scoop neck t-shirt, now mostly ripped off her.

No stilettos, G-string, or fishnets. She's obviously not one of the girls who works at The Mirage. Which begs the question, what the *fuck* was she doing hanging around out back of the place, where wastes of oxygen like those four motherfuckers could find her and try to hurt her like that?

My jaw tightens when my gaze drifts back over her raw knees, scraped palms, and bloodied face.

Not *try*.

They *did* hurt her.

The cut on her forehead is superficial, but heads bleed a lot. In any case, she needs to be seen by someone. So without any more overthinking on my part, I shut her door, walk around to my side, then slide in and start the engine.

The Aston Martin rumbles like a stealth fighter as I pull out into the night and start tapping NYU Langone Medical into the dashboard GPS.

The girl mumbles something, her mouth barely moving as her head lolls.

"Just relax, babygirl." I glance at her, then back to the road. "I'm taking you to the hospital. They'll get you fixed up, and then you can talk to the police about—"

"*No…*"

The word tumbles out of her mouth just as her shoulders slump back against the seat, like it took the last of her strength to push it over her lips.

"*No…police.*"

I shouldn't have gotten involved. And it's not that I regret it now that I *have*, but this is quickly becoming something I wasn't expecting or prepared for.

"It's okay," I growl, glancing at her again. "You won't have to face the guys who attacked you. But the police can put together some composite sketches, and call that club back there to check security footage—"

"*No police…*" Her head loosely flops side to side, her eyes still closed. "*Please…*"

My jaw ticks. A piece of the puzzle slides into place, tugging at me as I glance over at her again, her small frame illuminated by the glow of the dashboard.

I've been where she is. Before the power, and the money, I've *been there*: hurt, broken, beaten down, and knowing that the police weren't an option.

I don't know what the fuck I'm getting into with this. But for whatever reason, she doesn't want the scrutiny that will come with going to the cops. And if she goes to hospital looking like this?

They *will* get involved.

I take a slow, deep breath.

Fuck it.

I tap the map on my touchscreen again, switching destinations. I stomp on the brakes and pull a U-turn in the middle of the street before I roar off in a different direction.

She needs help.

I'm going to give it to her.

* * *

THE GATES to my sweeping estate in the Bronx swing open before I even come to a stop. I glide up the long, white gravel driveway, and then head

around to the back of the main house.

“Something you’d like to tell me, boss?”

Isaak’s voice rumbles from behind me as I lean into the passenger side and gather the girl in my arms. I lift her easily and turn to face my number two. His brow arches eloquently as his gaze drops to the unconscious girl in my arms.

“Nope.”

His gaze drags back up to mine.

“You’re…sure.”

“*Quite*,” I grunt. “But if you could bring a medical kit to the guest room, that’d be great.”

“Which guest room?”

Fair question. It’s a ten-bedroom home.

“Second floor, first at the top of the stairs.”

Isaak nods, glances at the girl again, then heads inside. I follow, but where he veers toward the storage room off the main kitchen, I head for the stairs. She’s still totally out of it as I climb them, holding her frame in my arms carefully, like I might break her if I walk too fast.

Inside the guest room, I lay her gently down on the bed, my jacket still covering her. I’m wetting a washcloth in the adjacent bathroom when there’s a knock at the bedroom door. Isaak steps in holding the medical kit and glances at me as he sets it down on the bedside table.

“I have to ask—”

“No, you don’t.”

He frowns. “Kir—”

“I stepped into something I probably shouldn’t have,” I growl. “And now I’m following through. That’ll be all, Isaak.”

He glares at me. “I’m not your butler,” he grumbles.

“Then you can stop standing around like you’re waiting to take my drink order.”

Isaak rolls his eyes. “For the record…” He glances down at the girl. “I think this—whatever it is—is a bad idea.”

“Noted. Good *night*, Isaak.”

When he’s gone, I sit on the edge of the bed and gently bring the washcloth to her forehead. She barely stirs as I dab at the cut on her forehead. It’s not that bad. She won’t even need stitches. But again, head wounds bleed *a lot*.

Slowly, I start to clean the dried blood from her face, pulling her matted blonde hair free as I go.

She’s like a beautiful little broken doll.

I dab the washcloth against the last matted lock of hair, freeing it from the crusted blood before I gently push it aside, finally revealing her face.

Instantly, I go still.

Because I suddenly realize the broken doll has a name, and it’s Brooklyn Ellis.

I know her.

Not well or personally, that is. We’ve hardly ever even spoken before. But I do own the Mercury Theatre and the Zakharova Ballet, with whom she dances.

From what I’ve seen, she appears relatively normal. She’s definitely a fantastic dancer. And I know for sure she doesn’t come from a mafia family, unlike most of the girls she tends to hang out with at the Zakharova.

So why in God’s name was she in that part of town, loitering behind a fucking strip club, attracting *that* sort of attention? And why the *fuck*—and I can’t overstate this enough—was this completely normal girl, with no ties to any mafia families, so insistent on “no police”?

I purse my lips, scanning the swelling on her cheekbone, the split at the corner of her mouth, and the cut on her forehead, which has stopped bleeding by now, thank Christ.

Her hands are scraped raw. Her knees are bloody.

Whatever her reasons for both, she's not going to be answering any questions while she's out cold.

Time to get to work.

I'm more than well-versed in basic first aid: what I didn't learn in Moscow, I got a crash course in during my stint at the penal camp when I was barely a teenager.

Knowing how to ice down bruises and stitch up basic cuts came in handy later on, when the boys at my private school realized I wasn't like them and didn't come from generational wealth that could be traced back hundreds of years.

I start with the cut on her forehead, cleaning it with antiseptic and then keeping it closed with a butterfly bandage, then putting some soft gauze on top of that. I get to work on her hands next, then her knees. Frowning, I pull my custom-tailored jacket off her body and set it on the bed.

The Moscow streets taught me pride and honor. Siberia taught me never to lose. Private school and then Oxford taught me that clothes *do*, in fact, make the man.

I take a pair of shears from the med kit and start cutting her ripped shirt from her body. Her bra is torn, so I cut that away too.

No, not to sneak a peek or cop a feel. I mean she's, what, fucking twenty-one? Twenty-two?

Gorgeous, with a lean, toned, dancer's body.

Pert, handful-sized breasts. Pink nipples. Soft skin.

My jaw tightens as I toss the shears away and use the washcloth to cover her chest a bit, reminding myself this isn't a fucking peep show.

I unzip and pull her skirt off next, *again*, not so my eyes can roam all over her body, but to make sure there aren't any other injuries I haven't noticed. Sure enough, I catch another cut on her shoulder and tape that up, as well as a scrape on her hip just above the waist of her black panties that's quickly bruising.

My jaw stays locked as I tape that up, too, ignoring my proximity to her warm body, covered only by the washcloth and little black thong.

As I pull back from bandaging her hip, my brow furrows deeply. I finally allow my gaze to roam over her body as black fury begins to swell inside me.

The head, knees, hands, shoulder, and hip are from tonight.

The other bruises are older.

The one on her elbow, in the clear shape of a handprint. The ugly greenish-purple mark on her stomach, near her ribs.

The bruising at her temple looks fresh, but not so fresh that it's from tonight.

A lethal coldness seeps into my veins as I pull my gaze back up to her sleeping face, her eyes fluttering slightly behind closed lids.

Who the fuck hurts you.

I don't know. But with a flash, I realize finding out has just become my single most important mission in life.

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4

BROOKLYN

IN MY DREAM, Pearl is a rocket ship, and I'm hanging onto her ratty old steering wheel for dear life as her explosive thrusters at the back propel us forward.

Blasting through the streets of New York. Angling so that we can roar up beyond the buildings, higher and higher into the sky, until we leave everything behind, my eyes closed and arms wide open, the black abyss of night surrounding me.

Then I wake up with a gasp, feeling pain *everywhere*.

I wince, choking back a groan as my brain slowly returns to consciousness. My head feels like I got hit by a hammer. My knees ache. My shoulder and hip are on fire, and my hands…

I squeeze my eyes shut, then open then, trying to blink away the grogginess as I lift my hands up in front of my face.

How did they get wrapped in bandages?

I shift again in bed, feeling the silk sheets slide over—

Wait.

What. Fucking. Bed.

"Who were the men attacking you?"

A scream curdles in my throat as I bolt upright. Pain explodes through every corner of my body, making me wince before my gaze snaps across the room and my heart drops.

A hundred questions roar through my head. But number one with a bullet is *why the fuck is Kir Nikolayev here?*

It's quickly followed by "where the fuck, for that matter, is *here*?"

The room goes quiet—so quiet that I can hear the dull thud of my pulse in my ears as I try to make sense of the fact that Kir Nikolayev, the owner of the Zakharova and essentially my boss, is sitting in a chair, looking at me with a slightly chilling, yet simultaneously *pulse-quickening* glint in his eyes.

Which is…not an unusual reaction to being looked at by him. Not for me, at least.

To characterize the man as "good-looking" is like calling one of Madame Kuzmina's grueling rehearsals "a bit challenging".

He's like a fucking god. Almost *too* attractive. Dark hair, sculpted cheekbones, a razor-sharp jawline and a square chin all make him look like a cross between legit royalty and a fucking Armani model.

He's tall, broad-shouldered, and allegedly—Milena's seen him lifting in the weightroom at the Mercury—hiding a physique that rivals most of the male dancers in the Zakharova half his age beneath those custom-tailored suits.

And his *eyes*…

I swallow, feeling the sinful pierce of those dark eyes as they lock with mine.

Dark, black, devil eyes.

He clears his throat.

"In case you're unaware…" His gaze flits briefly from my eyes to my chest, and his eyebrow cocks.

I glance down and my heart just about leaps out of my throat.

Jesus fucking Christ.

I yank the duvet up over my nakedness. Heat explodes across my face.

“Where am I?” I blurt, averting my gaze. There’s no way I can look him in the eye right now. “And where are my clothes?” I add, my voice shaking slightly.

Kir draws in a slow, deep breath.

“You’re in my home. You were attacked. I brought you here to take care of you—”

“Where are my clothes?” I say again, my voice rising half an octave as my hands tighten on the duvet cover. I pull it away a little, glancing down and exhaling with relief.

Still wearing panties, at least.

“If you can remember the men who—”

“Where the *fuck* are my clothes!?”

This time, I do meet his gaze—defiant, lips pursed tight, throat working.

His brow furrows. Is it annoyance, maybe, at being interrupted?

“I cut them off,” he growls, “in order to *examine* you, Brooklyn.”

Warmth slithers around my core, making it tighten. Fuck me, there’s something…*delicious* about this man saying my name.

The accent is part of it. Kir’s Russian, obviously, but he also apparently spent time—a fair bit, I think—in England. The result is a mostly posh upper-class British accent, with a slight Eastern European lilt that gives it this sinful edge.

His voice, and his looks, and his utterly room-commanding presence, are why Val and I have a way of thirsting after this man, joking about his “big dick energy”.

I mean…c’mon.

That’s a thing, and it’s Kir’s face you’ll see when you look it up in the dictionary.

“I’m going to ask again,” he murmurs quietly. “Who were the men who attacked you tonight?”

“They’re…”

What? Angry patrons from my fucking *strip club* side gig?

Yeah, I’ll definitely be telling the gorgeous billionaire Bratva kingpin sitting across the room all about that.

“I don’t know,” I mumble, looking down. “They just…attacked me.” I chew on my lip, still not looking at him. “That was you, wasn’t it? Who fought them off?”

Kir is silent for a long second. So long that I slowly drag my eyes back up to his.

“What were you doing in that neighborhood, Ms. Ellis?” he says, not even acknowledging my question.

My lips twist wryly. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“But that’s not what we’re doing,” he says evenly, his tone commanding no bullshit. “I asked you a question. You are going to answer it.”

That slithering warmth in my core tightens just a little more, sending a peculiar throb through my body.

His firm authority both annoys me and sends tingles rippling through every nerve in my body. It’s an authority I want to defy and, weirdly, utterly submit to.

“I was just…out,” I lift a shoulder.

“At a strip club.”

My lip recedes between my teeth again. “That…was a mistake. I shouldn’t have been there.”

“No *shit*,” he murmurs under his breath, his dark eyes narrowing sternly. “I prefer my dancers in one piece, Ms. Ellis.”

I nod, my lips twisting awkwardly as I finally meet his gaze.

“Thank you,” I say quietly. “Really. For…all of it.”

Kir dips his chin just barely, sitting back in his chair, his hands steepled in front of his way-too-gorgeous face. His long, masculine fingers tap together, the veins and tendons of his hands and muscled forearms rippling.

“Um…my clothes…”

“I told you: I cut them off of you to help you.”

“Well, I’d like to go home now…”

Kir takes a slow breath. “That’s not happening.”

I stiffen. “I… *What*?”

Kir stays exactly as he is, one ankle over the opposite knee, his face impassive.

I blink incredulously. “Am I a prisoner?”

He cocks a brow. “You’re injured, and—”

“*Am I a prisoner*?!” I yell.

“*No*,” he rumbles.

“Then I would like to go home. Please.”

He uncrosses his ankle from his knee and leans forward, resting his elbows on the thighs of his tailored trousers.

“T-thank you for what you did for me,” I say quietly, changing tactics. “But I would like to…”

I trail off as he suddenly stands and walks from the room without another word.

The seconds tick by.

What the actual *fuck*?

I glance around nervously, really taking in the insanely elegant bedroom—gorgeous paneled walls, huge windows covered with heavy, sumptuous shades, a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, dimmed low and casting kaleidoscoping fractals across the floor and the duvet over me.

Heavy footsteps announce his return. A second later, the man himself comes billowing back in like a storm cloud bringing lighting and thunder.

He's carrying a bundle in his hands, which he puts down beside me.

It's clothes. Women's clothes, specifically: lounge pants, a cardigan, a bralette.

Kir clears his throat, then frowns, glancing at his phone. "Excuse me a moment."

He walks over to the windows and starts furiously typing, his sharp jaw clenched with—tension? Anger?

When I turn my attention back to the clothes, my eyes widen.

They're…exactly my size. Like, *exactly*. And when I look at the labels, my jaw drops. The cardigan is Khaite. The bralette is Brunello Cucinelli. The silk drawstring lounge pants are freaking *Chanel*.

When I glance up in shock, Kir is off his phone and looking at me from where he's still standing by the windows, his tall frame rigid and imposing as he sweeps a hand over his jaw.

"How did you know my size…?"

His silence says it all.

He undressed me.

I mean, I still have my underwear on. And it's not like I'm shy about nudity, being a professional ballet dancer. Not to mention, you know, *a stripper*.

But stripping's for strangers. And at the ballet, it's backstage with other dancers.

Somehow, knowing that *this man* cut my clothes off and saw basically everything feels like another kind of nudity, weirdly intimate.

“These…”

“Are for you. Unless you’d prefer to go home *au naturel*.”

I feel myself blushing as I glance at the clothes, then back at Kir.

…Who still doesn’t make a move to leave the room.

“Thank you,” I say quietly.

He nods.

“So I’ll just…put these on, then?”

Kir clears his throat and turns his head. I guess that’s the most privacy I’m going to get right now. But it’s not like he hasn’t already seen me almost naked.

I gingerly slip out of the bed, standing on unsteady feet before I start gently pulling the clothes over my battered body.

Wow. I’m more beaten up than I thought. Plus…my heart drops…I missed work without even calling in. Lou is going to throw a fucking *fit*. And I *needed* that money.

I always need money. Derrick might not have been the world’s greatest stepdad, but he tried, and he’s the only real family I have left.

I start to think through the logistics of picking up an extra shift to make up for the missed income tonight.

Maybe I can sell these, I think morosely as I finish getting dressed in what is, by far, the most expensive clothing that has ever touched my skin.

Kir turns to face me, sensing I’m dressed.

“If you’re ready, I’ll drive you home.”

Shit.

“That’s okay,” I say weakly. “I’ll just take the subway—”

“It’s two-forty in the morning. I’m driving you home.”

The way he says it, like it’s a royal decree, has that strange slithering sensation winding through my core again.

He leads me out of the room and through his *insanely* beautiful home. Honestly, it’s like the guy lives in fucking Versailles. I’m not sure my jaw ever gets up off the floor the entire walk, starting from the bedroom I was in, down the hall and a sweeping staircase like something out of a Disney palace, through the ground floor and its enormous, professional-grade kitchen, and then out an unassuming back door to where a gorgeously sleek black *Aston freaking Martin* is parked on the white gravel driveway.

I mean, I knew Kir was rich. But holy *fuck*.

The engine purrs to life as I buckle in, the glow of the dash illuminating my wildly expensive new clothes as I discreetly run my fingers over the luxurious fabric. I smile with relief when I look down and see my grungy dance bag at my feet.

Kir clears his throat. “Your address?”

I’m prepared for this. Obviously, I’m not going to have him drop me off at a parked shitbox car that probably costs less than one hubcap on this thing. Which is also, you know, *my home*.

No fucking way.

I give him Val’s West Village address instead.

We drive in silence, him staring at the road, me desperately trying not to look at *him*. The whole time, I can’t stop touching the new clothes, like I’ve never felt this elegance and a level of wealth on my body.

I mean, I haven’t.

The gorgeous car pulls to a stop outside Val’s apartment building. Smiling weakly, I turn to Kir, shivering when I realize he’s already looking at me, those dark devil eyes piercing through my every thought.

“Thank you again,” I say quietly. “For all of it. Seriously.” I smile weakly. “Thank you, Mr. Nikol—”

“Sir.”

I stiffen, my mouth going dry as heat floods my core.

Did he just say that? As in, call me *sir*, not *Mr. Nikolayev*?

But if he can see the question on my face, he says or does nothing to answer it. He just keeps looking at me, those dark, gorgeous eyes eviscerating me as silence fills the inside of the car.

I chew on my lip for a moment.

“Thank you…*sir*,” I finally murmur.

Fuck me, why does that sound so dirty and hot?

“Try to be safer in future, Ms. Ellis,” he growls back.

I know the front door code to Val’s building, so I type that in, listening to the Aston Martin idling, feeling those devil eyes still on me. I open the door, slip inside, and turn to smile at him, giving him a dorky-ass wave that I instantly regret. I mean, cringe.

After I hear him drive off, I wait for a moment or two, then step back outside.

I’m *not* going to try explaining to Val why I’m showing up at his place at this ungodly hour, banged up, wrapped in bandages, and wearing like six thousand dollars’ worth of “casual wear”.

He’s probably with someone, anyway. Or a couple of someones.

Instead, I walk to the subway, wait for a train, then head “home” to Pearl.

It’s almost dawn by the time I get there, and I’ve got rehearsal in a few hours. But until then, I need to sleep.

I block out the windows, lock the doors, then string the cable lock between the handles of the two front doors.

Can’t be too careful, right?

I keep the new clothes on, shivering a little as I pull my blanket up over me and curl up in the back seat, thinking of the *stark* differences between my life and Kir’s. Of everything that happened tonight.

And, as sleep pulls me under, of dark, black, devil eyes.

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5

BROOKLYN

IT'S NOT A "MOVING" day for Pearl and I when I wake up a few hours later, thank God. I decide to skip Fit World, since I'm *exhausted*, and end up going back to sleep for another hour of gray early morning before it's really time to go.

Carefully, I change out of the priceless clothes I fell asleep in, fold them neatly, wrap them in a canvas bag, and stow them in the bottom of my dance bag.

I'm the only one at the Mercury Theater when I arrive an hour and a half before morning company class starts. That's on purpose, and not just to shower.

The practice studio is utterly quiet as I begin my stretches. My back bends smoothly as I slide my hands down my calves, wrapping my fingers around the arches of my feet as I exhale.

And yet, despite the calming stretches, the deep breathing, and the blissfully quiet, empty studio, there's nothing "calm" about my state of mind at all.

The easy answer would be that I was jumped last night. But the sad truth is, if it was "just" being jumped, that wouldn't even make the top ten awful things that have ever happened to me, between my time spent living out of Pearl and my years in the foster care system.

Fuck. Maybe not even the top twenty.

If Kir *hadn't* intervened, being gang-raped by those four assholes—or whatever else they had in mind—probably *would* have been the worst moment of my life.

But that didn't happen, because *he* was there.

He fought them off, brought me to his palatial home, and took care of me.

And cut your clothes off, and saw you almost naked and completely unconscious.

I try and shake those thoughts away, desperate for the calm Zen that stretching alone in the practice studio in the early morning usually brings.

But there's no Zen to be found today.

Not with Kir Nikolayev and his devil eyes running amok through my thoughts.

Prying into the darkest recesses of my mind. Feasting on the secrets there.

The weirdest part is, I still feel the way I did when I was naked in that bed, trembling under his dark gaze with that slithering sensation in my core. It's been like that ever since I stepped out of his car last night outside Val's place. It was there when I woke up. When I took the subway to the theater.

And it's still there now, tightening around my middle and consuming me from the inside out.

Eventually I manage to banish it to a corner of my mind as I stand from my stretches and move into a series of warmups.

When I'm dancing, *everything* else slips away.

The stench of neglect from broken homes. The empty feeling of having no one to hold me and tell me it's going to be okay. The looming threat of a "foster brother" who you just *know* is waiting for your eyes to close so he can put his fingers between your legs or grope your breasts.

When I move through the five positions of the feet and arms, or ease into a tendu, or nail a pirouette, it's all I know. All I feel.

That’s why I’m okay with everything that’s going on right now. Pearl. Navigating the crazies at the early morning budget gym, or at the food bank, or the rare times I can find room in a women’s shelter. Taking my clothes off and writhing on a pole while monstrous men throw wrinkled dollar bills and yell all the disgusting things they want to do to me.

I do and endure all that for *dance*.

My greatest love in the world.

None of my friends knows that I’m shooting for a spot with the *Ballet Imperiya Korona*. I don’t know why I haven’t told them yet—maybe because that adds more pressure that I don’t need, maybe because they’ll be the only thing I miss about New York if I get it and need to leave. But if they did know, and wanted to understand why I was so focused on getting into the company, I think I’d tell them that if ballet is my one great love, the *Ballet Imperiya Korona* is my ultimate Prince Charming.

Val would mock me *relentlessly* for framing it like that. Milena, too. Naomi and Lyra would probably smile and nod, and at least make a show of understanding.

Evelina, though? She’d totally get it, if for no other reason than she’s the real-life version of every singing, dancing, talks-to-animals Disney princess. If *anyone* would get a Prince Charming analogy, it’s her.

After a workout that leaves me breathless but grinning, I get to the slow and painful task of peeling off Kir’s bandages.

The wounds are going to mean questions from everyone today, and I don’t know what to tell them.

The scrapes on my knees aren’t that bad, and my tights will cover them anyway. My hands aren’t awful either: I can explain those marks with a lame “I tripped” excuse. The bruising on my hip and shoulder will be noticeable if anyone’s paying attention when we get changed at the end of the day. But I’ve learned, thanks to James, how to angle the marks away from any of my friends to avoid any conversations I don’t want to have.

The forehead is trickier, but I end up exchanging Kir’s bandage for a much smaller Band-Aid, using concealer on the bruising, and letting my hair fall

over it.

After a shower, I head outside to meet up with everyone else as they arrive. When I step out into the alley behind the theater, my phone rings just as I notice that nobody's here yet.

It's Diego, Derrick's lawyer.

"Brooklyn, hi," he says curtly. It's his way of starting almost every phone call we've ever had—which at this point is, frankly, a lot.

Derrick, my stepfather, has always been one of those guys who just has a way of finding trouble. He's a not a bad man, and he *really* did try after mom OD-ed and left him to care for me without any help at all.

He worked every odd job, watched YouTube videos to learn how to braid my hair, and kept me safe, clothed, and fed. Well, mostly.

It was the second time I showed up to school with lice, no socks, in clothes that *definitely* could have used a wash, and with a sandwich on moldy bread for lunch, that the school called CPS for a wellness check.

Again, Derrick's not a bad man. And he really did his best for me. But everyone has unlucky days. This was one of Derrick's.

When they showed up for the wellness check he was high, and in the middle of selling a bag of oxy to some buddies.

To be clear, he was never high around *me*, not that I knew of. But I was sleeping over at a friend's house that night, and I guess he just felt like he could…unwind.

Bad timing. Bad luck. Bad circumstances. Whatever you call it, that's the day I went into "the system".

Since then, Derrick's bad luck streak hasn't ever really ended. He's been in and out of jail a couple of times, mostly for things like petty theft. It was probably so he could eat or keep a roof over his head, still, a crime is a crime.

The last time I saw him, a little over two years ago, he was really turning things around. He was sober, going to meetings, staying in a clean halfway

house, and had a good job working for this high-end shop that did aftermarket work and fancy paint jobs on street racing cars. He even had a pretty decent-sized envelope of cash for me, which he *insisted* I take.

Then, bingo, a month later he was looking at federal grand larceny charges.

And that's when I met Diego Padilla, Derrick's lawyer.

The owners of the car shop claimed he'd been selling racing merch out of the back of the shop at night, to the tune of a million bucks. But I *know* Derrick didn't do it. I can hear it in his voice when he calls me on the phone from prison. The owners of the shop saw a guy no one would believe, ran some kind of insurance scam for "stolen parts", and dumped the whole thing on my stepdad.

The legal system is *cruel* if you're poor, and it's been a spiraling nightmare of bureaucracy, bullshit, and bills ever since. There's Diego's fee, because there's no way I'm letting a public defender decide Derrick's fate. Forensic accountants. Third party evidence auditors. Witness coaches. The court costs themselves.

It goes on and on. So between the *mountains* of money I put toward that, and the fact that ballet pays a poverty wage unless you're one of the superstars, you can see how shaking your ass on a pole for crumpled dollar bills suddenly becomes a viable option.

"Hey, Diego," I smile wryly. "Long time no talk."

It's a joke. I saw him two nights ago, when I gave him that wad of cash for Derrick's newest forensic accounting expert.

He sighs.

Fuck.

I know that long, drawn-out sigh. It means "You're not going to like this, and your wallet is going to like it even less."

"The Gordon brothers' counsel is claiming our forensic specialist is a nonstarter. He has a criminal record that wasn't disclosed."

I blink.

“*What*??”

“The guy stole a Mets jersey from a store. He was seventeen, but he was charged as an adult.” Diego sighs again. “It’s stupid kid bullshit, obviously, and it was forty fucking years ago. But…their legal counsel *does* have the right to challenge him, since he didn’t disclose it.”

I groan. “Okay, fine. So we get a refund and just use another—”

“Unfortunately, as soon as he was hired, he took a cursory look at the books. Technically speaking, services have already been rendered.”

My stomach drops. “So…no refund.”

Ten thousand dollars. Gone. Just like that.

“I’m sorry, Brooklyn,” Diego sighs. “Look, I’ve got another guy, and I’ve thoroughly vetted him personally. He’s good, but he’s also fifteen Gs.”

I want to cry.

It’s not *just* that I keep having to fork out huge sums of money to get Derrick’s name cleared that has me sleeping out of a Honda Accord. It’s also that I’ve been squirreling away as much as I possibly can.

Because when—not if—I get into the *Ballet Imperiya Korona*, it’s a full-time position. But it’s *unpaid*, because it’s an apprenticeship.

I mean you *could* work, if you could somehow find the time. But that’s only if you’re a Russian citizen. Foreign apprentices to the *Imperiya Korona* don’t get work visas.

“There’s other ways you could make cash over there…”

I cringe when I remember Carrie, from The Mirage, butting into my conversation with Maya about this and giving her two gross cents. “I mean, you’re young, you’re pretty, you’re *American*…” She’d shrugged. “Men would pay…”

My stomach had twisted with nausea when she said it.

Yeah, *not* happening. But that means socking away as much as I can now. Which is sort of hard when Derrick’s legal case keeps hemorrhaging money

like this.

“Brooklyn?”

I exhale, groaning. “Still here. Sorry.”

Diego clears his throat. “If we want this guy…and I do recommend him… I’ll need the money from you by next week. Is that doable?”

Doable? Yes. Crippling? Also yes, with a bullet.

“Sure,” I mumble, glancing up to see Val and Evie walking down the alley toward where I’m leaned against the back of the theater. “I’ll have it for you.”

“Great. Appreciate it. Anything you want to pass on to your stepfather? I’ll be having a call with him in a few days.”

I shake my head. “Just… Tell him to hang in there.”

* * *

“*You*.”

The blood drains from my face when I hear his voice behind me. I can see the same anxious horror on Maya’s face that I’m sure is all over mine before I pull away from her and turn to face Lou.

I’ve had about a dozen missed calls and a slew of furious texts from him since no-showing last night. I’ve just been giving Maya the run-down about what happened to me last night and why I missed work. I hadn’t decided if I was going to tell her about Kir saving me or just lie and say I got away. But now Lou’s interruption saves me from having to make that choice.

Lou is middle-aged and probably less than ten years older than Kir, but the difference between them is staggering. Thinning, wiry gray hair, a perpetual shaggy, unkempt scruff on his jowls, breath that reeks of cigars and cheap whiskey, and hands that like to touch, pinch, grab, and otherwise molest things they shouldn’t.

He’s a roundish man who tends to wear cheap dress pants slung low, underneath his beer gut, paired with obnoxiously loud “silk” Italian shirts, open about three buttons too many, to show off his hairy man-cleavage and gold chains.

He’d be a comically gross 1970s throwback if he wasn’t, one, my boss, and two, an *utter* creep.

The way his smile is curling lecherously at the corners right now sends sick feelings curdling through my gut.

“My office,” he snaps. “Now.”

He turns and storms out of the dressing room. I glance at Maya, who tries to give me an encouraging look, but it’s clouded by worry.

“He hasn’t had a drink yet,” she says quietly. “Not here, at least.” Her mouth twists. “He was *pissed off* last night, girl. But you know Lou. He’ll yell and be an asshole. But you and I are two of the highest earners here.” She hugs me. “You’re not going nowhere, okay?”

But it’s not being fired that I’m worried about as I turn and follow Lou down the hall to his grubby, foul-smelling office.

“Close the door,” he grunts from the squeaky chair behind his cluttered desk as I step into the room.

A chill runs down my spine as I feel the door click shut behind me.

Please no.

Not this again.

“Where the *fuck* where you last night?” Lou snaps, his beady eyes glaring at me.

“Lou, I’m *so* sorry,” I gush. “I was out back, and these four guys from the night before jumped me. Remember the finance guys from the bachelor par—”

“All I’m hearing is bullshit and excuses, Brooky.”

Fuck, I *hate* that name. It's so infantilizing. My mom also called me that, which brings up a whole other mixed bag of emotions.

"Lou, they *jumped me*." I show him my hands and lift my hair off my forehead.

Lou looks at me impassively.

"Like, all four of them chased me and dragged me to the ground," I continue, feeling panicky. "Look." I yank my skirt up and lift a knee. "See?"

Lou grins. But he's not looking at my knee.

I quickly lower my leg and smooth my skirt back down, my stomach churning.

"Four of 'em, huh?"

"Yeah," I nod.

Lou sneers. "You fuck all of them?"

My gut twists. "*No*, I—"

"You left me fucking hanging last night, Brooky."

My lips press together. "Lou, I'm *sorry*, but it was a little beyond my control—"

"Come here, Brooky."

No. Please God, no.

"Come *here*," he growls, a sick sneer on his face as he taps the desk in front of him and pushes his rolling chair back from it.

My body goes numb. It only happened one time before this. I was new to the club, down to literal *dollars* in savings, and desperate.

And Lou knew it. Smelled it the way a shark smells blood in the water.

He told me all his "favorite girls" did this for him sometimes. "You help me, I help you get the good shifts," he'd said as he grinned at my tearful

face and pushed me to my knees.

I tried to think about anything except what was happening while it was going on. I thought of ballet. I went through the thirty-two *fouettés* in the coda of *Swan Lake*'s Black Swan *Pas de Deux*, and Nikiya's beautiful solo from *La Bayadère* while Lou's thin, disgusting penis thrust weakly between my lips.

"Brooky…"

I blink, the color drained from my face as I stare at Lou, glaring at me.

"I said *get your ass over here*."

"Lou, I'm sorry—"

"I know you are," he leers. "And now you're going to show me exactly *how* sorry you are." He shrugs. "Or…" His lips curl viciously. "There's the fucking door."

For a second, I almost do it. I *almost* turn and give him the finger on my way out.

But fucking hell, I need the money from this job. For my survival, my future in Moscow, and Derrick's legal bullshit. To stop the whole world from caving in.

A numbness replaces my pulse as I shuffle across the room toward the predator sitting behind his desk, already loosening his belt. I move around the edge of his desk until I'm between it and him, leaning back with my arms folded protectively over my chest.

"C'mon, Brooky," he grunts. "Ain't gonna suck itself."

Bile and sick swirl in my stomach.

"Look, we doing this or not, kid?" he snaps. "If not, again, there's the door."

He grabs my wrists and yanks my arms down to my sides. He grins as he fumbles with my breasts, grabbing and squeezing and groaning in sick pleasure as I try to escape to a black hole inside my mind.

“Mmm, baby, you might have small ones. But they’re still pretty sweet,” he grunts. “Show me.”

I look away, hating myself, life, the world, Lou, as I lift my shirt. I shudder when he grabs the cups of my bra and yanks them down to paw my bare skin.

“On your fucking knees, Brooky,” he rasps, his face red, eyes gleaming, breath coming faster. “Better make it nice, baby. Your job’s on the line here. If it’s no good…” He winks at me. “Well, there’s always other holes for my dick, yeah?”

My stomach heaves. I can actually feel the vomit trying to surge up my throat as I drop to my knees in slow motion.

Suddenly, there’s a pounding at the door.

“Lou, we got a problem!” Zak, Lou’s head bouncer, roars through the door. “I’m gonna need you out here!”

Relief floods through me like cleansing fire.

“God *dammit*!” Lou hisses, his face sweating as he lurches from his chair and fumbles to button his pants and buckle his belt again.

I get to my feet, trying to pull away as Lou reaches out and grabs my tits again.

“Rain check, Brooky,” he wheezes, shoving past me and toward the door. I tug my bra back into place and drop my shirt back down just as he yanks the door open.

“Hey, Lou, thank God.”

Maya. I could cry. Or kiss her. Or both.

She shoots a quick look past Lou in my direction, nodding her chin just enough to let me know.

I got you.

“Couple of high-roller types. Armenian mob, maybe?” She sighs with exasperation. “Someone spilled a drink on one guy’s suede jacket, and he’s

accusing one of the waitresses…" She shakes her head.

"Shit's getting rowdy, Lou," Zak mutters, also shooting a quick glance past his boss toward me. But this isn't a look of concern. It's tinged with anger.

Maybe something approaching jealousy.

Great.

"I'd kick 'em all out, but they're on your VIP list, so…"

"Fuck," Lou sighs. "Yeah, I'll take care of it."

He storms past the two of them in the direction of the VIP rooms. Zak is muttering to one of the other bouncers on his earpiece, turned away, when Maya slips into Lou's office and moves to my side.

"Hey," she says quietly, her eyes searching my pale face. "You okay?"

I smile uncertainly. "Yeah…"

"Did that motherfucker—"

"*You rescued me at the last minute,*" I croak, my voice breaking as I reach out and squeeze her hand with mine.

"Maya!" Zak nods his chin at her. "They want you in room three to help Lou smooth shit out. Get your ass going."

"Okay, okay, no need to get rude," Maya flashes the sort of smile at Zak that she usually reserves for the shittiest, most offensive customers.

Kill 'em with kindness.

She glances at me once more before she leaves the room. I start to follow, but Zak moves in front of me, blocking my way.

"The fuck was going on in here?"

I shake my head, not meeting his eyes. Zak is a big, beefy guy who looks like he lives at the gym and eats creatine and steroids for breakfast, lunch and dinner. He wears his long hair in a tight man-bun, *loves* it when his job

includes hitting people, and has this utterly psychotic tribal tattoo around his right eye and down one side of his face.

He might be head of security, which in theory includes protecting the dancers. But honestly, he scares the shit out of me.

“Nothing,” I mumble. “Just talking schedule with Lou.”

He grunts.

“You and me should go out sometime.”

Not in a million fucking years, buddy-boy.

“Yeah...” I murmur. “Sounds…like fun?”

I chance a furtive look at his terrifying face.

Fucking hell, that tattoo is *insane*, and extremely scary.

Zak grins. “Yeah? When?”

Fuck.

“Soon,” I smile a wilted smile at him. “Listen, I gotta go get changed for my shift.”

“Don’t keep me waiting,” he calls after me. “Or I’ll have to come find ya!”

Horror, shame, hatred, fear, and everything in between ripples up my spine and settles in my chest.

Why the *fuck* are all men like this?

Well…not *all* men, I think, heat pooling low in my core.

“You’re in my home. You were attacked. I brought you here to take care of you.”

“Who were the men who attacked you?”

“Try to be safer in future, Ms. Ellis.”

“Thank you, sir…”

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6

KIR

"I HAVEN'T SEEN you in here in a while."

I look up from where I'm sitting at Magda's desk and smile as she steps into…well…*her* office.

I own the Mercury theater, and as of recently, when I took over the other shareholders' positions, the Zakharova ballet company itself. But this office is still, unequivocally, Magda's space.

"I apologize," I clear my throat as I stand. "I should have called—"

"Please, Kir." She smirks and rolls her eyes, like she sees right through my charm.

I mean, she does.

"What do you need, Kir? Maybe I can help."

She adjusts her long black shawl with the silk fringe along the edges, the fifteen or so silver rings on her fingers glinting in the light.

Everyone, and I do mean *everyone*, has a "front" they present to the world. With some—me, for example—that "front" isn't so much a mask as it is a veneer to cover the rawness, perhaps a touch of monstrousness beneath.

Private school and Oxford taught me the importance of that.

Others wear masks to hide insecurities, fears, or other traits they wish to obscure from the world.

But then there are a few who just…decide to adopt a role and *stick* to it.

Magda Kuzmina is the poster child for that third one.

Similar to that second group I mentioned, there are parts of her—specifically her past, who her family was, and her journey to get to where she is today—that she has no intention of sharing with anyone.

Anyone.

The only reason I know is I was *there* for some of that journey, and involved with her family and her past, to a certain extent.

Magda's older brother, Gavriil, was a classmate of mine at Oxford, and—well, it's a long, bitter story.

But the other "front" Magda presents to the world is that of the "brutal ballet director with a heart of ice, cloaked in black shawls, rings, and mystery". It creates a shield between the Magda I met many years and tragedies ago and anyone who might try to find that version of her today.

It *works*. The dancers at the Zakharova are mostly terrified of her. And I can't imagine anyone in their right mind would try and fuck with her.

If they did, of course, I'd find out, and I'd cut them in half. But it's never been an issue. It doesn't hurt that she goes out of her way to make herself invisible to men: shapeless black dresses, cloaks, the perennial shawls. Heavy black makeup around her eyes but none on her lips or cheeks. There's an air of mystique around her—but less a beguiling woman you want to unravel, and more a Roma fortune teller who might curse your cock to fall off.

It also gives her the appearance of being *much* older than the thirty-four she really is. I'd bet most of her dancers wouldn't guess that she's under forty.

For a second, I'm tempted to lie about what's brought me to her office above the theater today.

Instead, I give the truth without the reason behind it.

"I was looking for your personnel files."

A dark brow arches inquisitively. “On my dancers?”

I nod.

She considers me a moment before she drifts past me. Sitting at the desk which I’ve just vacated, she opens the lower drawer and pulls out a laptop, opens it, types in a password, clicks on a folder, and turns the screen to me before stepping aside.

“Anyone in particular?”

Magda is *far* too shrewd to be lied to. And she knows me too well for me to try.

“Brooklyn Ellis.”

A faint smile curls the corners of her lips as she glances back at the screen and clicks on one of the subfolders, opening a document.

“I suppose this means you’ve heard from Ivan.”

My brow furrows. “Ivan…?”

Magda gives me a piercing look. “Yelchin.”

Confusion grabs my brain in its fist.

“What does Ivan have to do with Brooklyn?”

Ivan is an old friend of mine from boarding school, a fellow Russian castaway who went on to have an illustrious dance career and is now the Artistic Director of the *Imperiya Korona* in Moscow—AKA, the man I’ll be calling in a favor with to get Inessa Moskovic into the company.

Magda gives me a curious look. “You didn’t know?”

She sighs, shaking her head as she pushes me aside and scrolls down through Brooklyn’s file.

“She auditioned for the *Imperiya Korona*'s ballet mistress, Liliya Rostova, a month ago, when Liliya was visiting New York.”

My brows knit. “Did she now.”

Magda smiles wryly. “She did. And unfortunately for us, Liliya liked her and put her on the short list for the one apprenticeship available this year.”

Something rancorous and bitter slams into me, my jaw clenching as I read the note in Brooklyn’s file.

Holy fuck.

I’ve seen her dance, of course, though not with a particularly analytical eye. She’s very good, and extremely disciplined. But I wouldn’t have guessed that she was aiming as high as the *Imperiya fucking Korona.*

I turn to look at Magda. “What are your thoughts on that?”

She scowls. “She’s…quite good. Incredible, actually, though she has a way of blending into the background and never quite putting herself out there. I would say she’s easily up there with Naomi Kim or Dove Marchetti… No, I’ll be blunt. She’s the best dancer in the Zakharova. Losing her will hurt us.”

I frown. “So you think she’ll get the apprenticeship?”

Magda snorts, curling and uncurling her fingers, making the rings on them glitter in the light. “I’m quite sure she will. I’ve seen the short list. It’s between her and three other girls—Lin Xiuya from China’s Zhūjiāng Bālěiwǔtuán, the Teatro dell’Aurora in Florence’s Allegra Vitale and Camille Blanchet, of L’Académie de Paris.”

She turns and walks across the office to an electric kettle by the window and switches it on.

“Tea, Kir?”

“No thank you.”

She nods and pulls a mug and small wooden tea caddy from a drawer, then scoops some loose leaves into a small cotton drawstring bag.

“They’re all quite talented. But…” She shakes her head. “I say this as an impartial teacher of ballet, not as *Brooklyn’s* teacher…she’s the best. It’s not even close. They would be fools not to take her.” Magda sighs. “She’s

hungry for it, too," she adds. "Brooklyn, I mean. She's got both the talent *and* the desire to be there."

Interesting.

Interesting and tragic. For Brooklyn, that is. Because that one apprenticeship is already going to someone else.

And I'm the asshole who's going to make sure that happens.

While Magda's water boils, I scroll up through Brooklyn's file. Just as I suspected, her address doesn't match the one where I dropped her off last night. I make a note of the real one as the kettle starts to whistle.

"Why did you stop, Kir?"

I glance over at Magda as she pours the boiling water over the tea leaves, then dunks the bag a few times.

"Stop what?"

She smirks. "*Dancing*." She brings her mug to her lips, breathing in the steam. "You were quite good, as I remember."

I chuckle, smiling wryly. "That's generous of you."

"Kir." She rolls her eyes. "If you're fishing for more compliments, don't bother. I'm done. But I'm serious, and you know it. You were *excellent*. And then you just…stopped."

"I'm not sure it's compatible with my current line of work," I say dryly.

"Fuck conventions, Kir."

I sigh, shaking my head. "Indeed."

Fuck conventions. And fuck *me*, because soon, I'm going to have to crush Brooklyn Ellis's dream under my heel.

And I'm strangely unwilling to do that.

* * *

WHEN MAGDA GOES DOWNSTAIRS to sow terror among her dancers, I stay in the office to watch for a bit. Magda's office is perched above the lighting booth at the rear of the theater, up in the balcony, with two windows that give a clear view of the stage.

Everyone in the Zakharova—and I say this as modestly as I can, given that it's *my* company now, ever since I bought out the other investors—is beyond talented. The obvious standouts, as Magda correctly identified, are people like Naomi and Dove. But Lyra Ostrova, Milena Kalishnik, and Evelina Nikitin are also *phenomenal*, and as obnoxious as I find his fuck-boy antics most of the time, there's no denying that Val Bancroft is an exceptional dancer, too.

But today, I find myself watching one dancer in particular, and ignoring the rest.

Not *just* because the image of her lying in my guest room bed in just a pair of thong panties is permanently etched into my brain.

…Although I'd be lying if I said that particular visual didn't dance through my head as I watch *her* dance across the stage.

And as I watch her, I do so through the lens of what Magda just told me.

Fuck me. She's right.

I've never really noticed it before, because as Magda correctly pointed out, Brooklyn has a way of hiding her talent. Holding back. Not quite letting herself put the gas pedal all the way down.

But fucking hell, she's astonishing.

I know firsthand the grueling, rigid discipline that ballet demands. I lived that life for *years*.

Ballet was part of the demanding physical regime—along with gymnastics and hand-to-hand combat—hammered into the boys at the boarding school I was sent to after my time in the gulag in Siberia. Not with a view to a career or anything; I think they liked the incredible self-discipline it instils in you. As a teacher once said to me, "I can tell you to use that muscle all I like. You're the only one who can actually do it."

I kept dancing when I went to Oxford. But Magda is right: after that, I just…stopped. Boxing became more my thing. Still, I've never forgotten the discipline of those days in the studio, pounding out the movements and drilling the positions over and over again, until they were a part of you.

It's with that mindset that I watch Brooklyn as she dances across the stage below.

She *is* good. Beyond good: she's phenomenal. But as I watch, my brow furrows with curiosity as I notice something Magda didn't mention, which makes me wonder if she has noticed it herself.

Brooklyn is *very* talented. But she's also *scared*. She's afraid to truly let go, and it's holding her back.

Part of me starts to say "The *Imperiya* will never let her in with that sort of mindset," but then I catch myself.

She won't get in *at all*.

Because of me.

* * *

THE ASTON MARTIN is hardly a subtle car. But it sticks out even more in East Harlem, up by the Willis Avenue Bridge.

I pull to a stop in front of a shitty-looking graffiti-sprayed building and a burned-out dumpster half blocking the alley next to it.

I'm still looking up at the building with a scowl on my face when a young guy in a baggy hoodie walks over and raps his knuckles on my window.

"What up," he grunts as I roll the window partway down. "What're you lookin' for?"

"Nothing, thanks," I growl.

A scowl etches over his brow. "Then move the fuck off, man. This is a prime shopping district."

Prime for crack, fentanyl, or whatever the fuck else he's hawking.

"I'm going to be here a minute," I say evenly.

His eyes narrow. "Listen, motherfucker. You either buy, or you fuck off—"

"I said I'm good, thanks." I open my jacket slightly, flashing the grip of my gun. It doesn't scare him—I don't expect it to. But it does send a message that I'm not some douchebag tourist looking to score. I play in the big leagues.

"All right, all right, man," he mutters, eyeing me.

"Here." I pull four hundreds out of my clip and hand them to him. "I'm *not* buying whatever you're selling. But I appreciate that I'm hampering your foot traffic. We good?"

He grins, pocketing the cash. "*Shit*. Stay as long as you like, buddy."

"Appreciate it." I open the door and step out, then hand him another hundred. "No one fucks with the car, either."

He chuckles and nods his chin. "*Mi casa es su casa*, my man."

Wonderful.

It turns out Brooklyn's address is diagonally across the street from the building I parked in front of. So I head over and start scanning the buzzers for her name.

"Can I help you?"

I turn to see a pretty Latina woman in cutoff jean shorts and a hoodie eyeing me, a bag of groceries cradled in one arm, a keychain in the other hand, and a suspicious look on her face.

"Perhaps," I say slowly. "Do you live here?"

Her suspicion level dials up to eleven.

"I'm looking for someone I believe also lives here," I add. "Brooklyn Ellis?"

Her shoulders instantly relax a little. “Oh, sorry. Are you from the lawyer’s office?”

“I…yes,” I smile. “I am.”

Fuck.

I wasn’t quick enough on the draw with that, and this girl caught it *instantly*.

“She’s not here right now,” she says, her hackles back up as she eyes me.

“I see. Well, maybe I’ll check back another time.”

“She’ll be out then, too,” she says promptly.

I hold back a grin. I like this girl.

“Thanks for your time, Miss…?”

“I don’t think so.”

This time, I allow the smile to reach my lips. “Fair enough.”

It would be so much easier if I just told her that I’m here on Zakharova Ballet business. But that’s *not* true, and I don’t want Brooklyn knowing that I’m snooping around where she lives.

Fuck, I don’t even really know why I’m doing it in the first place.

I walk back across the street to my car, pretending to check my phone as I watch the girl in the reflection of my passenger window. She looks at my back for another few seconds before she unlocks the door and slips inside.

It’s not lost on me that she tugs the front door shut behind her, hard.

My drug-dealing new friend grins when I walk over to where he’s sitting on another stoop with a few buddies.

“Need me to walk your dog or get you a taxi?” he snickers. “That’ll be another hundo.”

I peel off five more and hold them up between two fingers.

The chuckles fade.

“I’m looking for someone, and I think she lives over there.” I turn and nod my chin at the building. Then I dig out my phone, go to the Zakharova website, and zoom in on Brooklyn’s artist headshot. I hold the phone up for them to see. “Her.”

A couple of the guys shrug and shake their heads. But the leader, my new best buddy, slowly grins and nods.

“Oh, shit, yeah. Blondie?” He whistles. “Girl’s *hot*.”

My jaw tightens.

Careful, I want to snarl at him for reasons I don’t quite understand.

“She lives there?”

“If you don’t like the answer, you still gonna pay me?”

“Sure, if it’s the truth.”

He nods. “Fair. No, man. I don’t think she lives there.”

Shit.

“But she does come around pretty often. Her friend—that Latina chick you were talking to? She lives there. I think Blondie just gets her mail delivered here. She shows up and leaves with envelopes, sometimes packages.”

Interesting.

Very interesting.

I thank him, pay him, and get back in the car with more questions rattling around my head than when I got here.

I know she doesn’t live where I dropped her off. On a hunch, I glanced at the files of her friends when I was still up in Magda’s office, and it was *Val’s* apartment that she directed me to the other night.

She doesn’t live there. She doesn’t live here.

So where *does* she live? Why the fuck is it some big state secret? Why do I *care*?

My jaw tightens.

I know why. It's the same reason I can't stop fixating on her, or her bruises.

…Or, rather, who *gives her* those bruises, and how I can fucking destroy them.

Somehow, Brooklyn Ellis has managed to slip her way under my skin and is now the object of my full and undivided attention.

God help her.

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7

BROOKLYN

I STAY LATE after everyone else has gone home. Ostensibly, it's because I've told my friends that I'll clean up the feast we had right after rehearsal. Naomi and Lyra's father-in-law, Vito Barone, swung by right as we were finishing for the night with this *gigantic* spread of Italian and chicken parm sandwiches, along with an obscene quantity of cannoli.

"Even though they're Sicilian," he made sure to add with a wink.

I made a big show of telling everyone that this was my way of paying Lyra and Naomi back for the meal—by cleaning up and bringing the leftovers to the food pantry down the street.

I *am* going to do that. But I'm also going to be taking as much of this home to Pearl as I think will fit in the cooler in her trunk.

I mean, free food is free food.

I've got everything boxed up for the food bank, along with a crazy amount of chicken parm and cannoli for myself, when a sudden noise has me jerking around, pulse racing as I peer into the darkness outside the practice studio.

"H-hello?" I blurt.

Dove steps out of the shadows, dance bag slung over her shoulder, her wet pinkish-silver hair pulled up in a loose ponytail.

Dove is, for lack of a better word, *cool*, in that effortlessly chic, rock n' roll way. She's gorgeous, firstly, with silvery-pink hair, tattoos, and serious mystery vibes constantly swirling around her. You'd never guess that she's the daughter of Cesare Marchetti, head of the Marchetti Italian mafia family.

"Aloof" isn't really the word you'd use to describe her, though she can be. She's only been with the Zakharova for a couple of months, and while she's friendly enough when she feels like it, she mostly keeps to herself. I always think the secret sauce to her "cool" factor is that *no one knows* where she was before this.

It certainly wasn't New York, but other than that, the rumors range from an arranged marriage in Italy, to a reform school in France, to a high-end drug rehab in Switzerland.

I highly doubt it's any of those, but wherever she was, the girl got some serious dance training in. She's *insanely* talented, and her dancing appears effortless. Which, honestly, is intimidating as fuck.

"Shit, sorry. I didn't realize anyone was still here," she says as she walks over to where I've got the sandwich boxes stacked. "I decided to get some running in on the treadmill downstairs and then grabbed a shower." She glances at the tower of Italian subs and drops her bag to the ground. "Want a hand with those?"

"Actually…yeah," I smile at her. "If you don't mind, I was just going to bring them to the First Congregational food bank down on 54th."

"You were going to carry two hundred pounds of chicken parm there by yourself?"

I grin. "Vito *really* went overboard with that, didn't he?"

She groans and holds her stomach. "God, why do you think I hit the treadmill?"

We end up splitting the stack of to-go boxes and making small talk as we walk the few blocks to the church food bank.

“Hey…” Dove scrunches her face up, her lips twisting as she glances at me. “This is weird, but…” She shakes her head. “Nah, don’t worry about it. See you tomorrow.”

I arch a brow. “Well, now I’m intrigued…”

Dove makes a face. “I was just wondering, if you aren’t busy right now… Do you think you could give me a hand moving something?” She clears her throat. “Like…discreetly?”

Umm…

She laughs, sensing the alarm bells in my head. “Not a body, I swear.”

My shift at The Mirage doesn’t start until later tonight, so I grin. “I’m in.”

And just like that, I’m hanging out with Dove for the first time.

“I live with my dad,” she suddenly says in the dim back seat of the Uber as we cross the bridge into Brooklyn Heights.

“That must be…nice?”

She glances at me, a wry look on her face. “You do know who my dad is, right?”

I smile at her. “I might have heard.”

She shrugs and turns to stare out the window. “I’m trying to get my own place but…” Her brow furrows slightly. “It’s complicated.”

“From what I hear, family always is,” I offer.

“Trust me,” she sighs. “You’re not missing out. Feel free to borrow mine *any* time.”

I don’t really know much about the Marchetti family. I know Dove’s got a sister, Chiara, who’s apparently a mafia princess straight out of a movie. I’ve also heard that Cesare, Dove’s father, is a real asshole.

Bet that’s a fun house to live in.

I stare out the window in awe as we pull up to a huge gothic mansion, surrounded by a high stone wall and half-shrouded in towering oak trees.

I don't let it drag me down, because I *can't*, but sometimes, it's truly shocking to me how different people in the same city can live such *vastly* opposite lives.

I live in a Honda Accord. Dove lives in a mansion in the quaintest neighborhood in New York. I mean, obviously a *haunted as fuck* mansion. But still.

"This is me, back here."

Dove purposely steers clear of the imposing front door of the Marchetti mansion. Instead, she directs the Uber around the side of the house and up the driveway that loops through the gothic *porte-cochère* until we're in front of a super-cute carriage house.

"The one perk of moving back home," she says dryly. "I don't actually have to be *inside* the actual home."

When we step in through the side door, she flips on the lights, and my jaw drops.

Wait, what?

I blink, turning slowly, drinking in the dozens of *huge* canvases covered in vibrant paint leaning against walls, the stairs to the lofted section, stacked up at the back of the couch, even one resting against the side of the refrigerator.

Splatters, dark, vicious streaks of paint. Explosive patterns of rage or passion.

I turn to stare openly at Dove.

"Are these…*yours*? Like, did you paint them?"

She grins sheepishly and lifts a shoulder. "Yeah," she shrugs. "This is me."

"Get the *fuck* out," I laugh, shaking my head. "That is *super* unfair."

She grins nervously, shaking her hair out of the ponytail and letting the silvery-pink strands frame her face. “What is?”

“You’re an *insanely* good dancer *and* a freaking genius artist. I mean, *come on*!”

She giggles, rolling her eyes. “Well, thank you. But this is just like…I don’t know. A hobby. Therapeutic, I guess?”

I shake my head, turning to stare open-mouthed at her work again. “Dove, I’m serious. These are *really* fucking good. You should show these to people.”

She flashes an awkward smile. “Uh…That’s kinda what I need your help with.”

My brow furrows in confusion before she grins and nods her chin up the stairs to the loft area. “Up here.”

“*Fuck*.”

The word falls unbidden from my mouth when I get to the top of the stairs and stare at the enormous work of art hung on the wall above a quickly made bed.

It’s gorgeous: huge, bold streaks of red and black over exploding splatters of blue and white.

“*Damn*,” I breathe, turning to her, my eyes wide. “*So* fucking good, Dove.”

She grins. “Thanks. I’m putting it in a show tomorrow.” She puffs air through her lips nervously. “My first show, actually.”

“Dove!” I whirl on her. “That’s amazing!”

A big, honest smile tugs at her lips. “Thanks, Brooklyn.” She makes a face as she glances up at the painting. “But I need to get it downstairs to pack up for the gallery movers tomorrow, and it’s…kinda heavy.”

“Say less,” I grin at her. “I’m in.” Then I frown. “Wait—why did you say we have to move this *discreetly*?”

She gives me a small grin. “Because it needs to go into the back of my truck, but my dad can’t know I’m entering a show.” Her brow furrows deeply. “He…uh…” She looks away. “He’d just be a real prick about it if he knew.”

“Got it,” I say, earnestly nodding. “Then let’s do this and not get caught.”

It’s a seriously heavy painting, because it’s *huge*, and in a wooden frame. But we eventually manage to finagle it down the stairs and into the bubble wrap that Dove has ready. From there, we quickly carry it outside and slide it into the back of the insanely cool old Land Rover Defender parked next to the carriage house.

“When’s the show?” I ask her when we’re back inside after our great art heist caper. “We should tell everyone at work. They’d *freak* if they saw your work.”

She winces, wagging her head side to side. “I’m…not that open about this with most people.”

I frown. “The painting stuff? Really?”

She nods. “Yeah. It’s weird, I know. But if you could not…”

I smile and zip my lips. “I won’t say a word. I get secrecy, trust me.”

“Thanks,” she smiles back. Then she eyes me, her brow arching. “I hope you know that you’re a *seriously* good dancer.” She frowns. “I’m not sure I’ve said that to you before, but… You’re incredible. I love watching you dance.”

I blush, grinning. “Sorry, I’m shitty at taking compliments. But…thanks?”

She laughs. “I see we have the same childhood trauma. Awesome!”

I laugh back, but then she clears her throat and peers at me a little closer.

“I know you auditioned for the *Ballet Imperiya Korona*.”

My mouth falls open before I can stop it.

“Uh…what?”

She smirks at me. “When Liliya Rostova was in New York a month or so ago? Ringing any bells?”

I groan. “Okay, okay. Guilty.”

Dove laughs and plops down on one end of the sofa, and I follow suit on the other side.

My brows knit. “Wait. How did you know that?”

She shrugs with a mysterious grin on her face. “You hear things, you know?”

“Yeah, well, speaking of not saying a word…”

She shakes her head. “Oh, I figured when I didn’t hear you telling anyone at work that you wanted to keep it quiet.” She slowly nods. “I won’t mention it to anyone, don’t worry.”

“Thanks.”

She sucks her teeth, running her fingers through her hair. “It’s *very* hard to get in, as you know. But…” She frowns. “It’s about…more than just how you dance.”

My face scrunches up. “Oh, I know.”

It’s why in my brief moment of clarity the other night, when I realized someone was driving me somewhere, saying they were going to get me help, I blurted out something dumb like “no police.”

It was *not* because I’ve got a mountain of unpaid parking tickets and I sleep in the back of Pearl. It’s the same reason I’ve never gone to the authorities about any of the vile, monstrous shit that James or Lou have done.

Because Dove’s right: the *Ballet Imperiya Korona* does not just care about how well you can dance. They’re looking for class. For *pedigree*.

…Needless to say, domestic abuse charges, or the police looking into you getting mugged outside the *strip club* where you work, don’t do much for your image.

Dove smiles at me. “Forget about that whole pedigree crap. Fuck it. You are *very* fucking talented, Brooklyn. I mean *Ballet Imperiya Korona* talented. Enough that they won’t care about who your family is or isn’t, or how much money you come from, or any of that elitist bullshit.”

I feel my face heating as I stammer a thank you. But then I deflate a little. “They also look for existing connections to the company, though,” I exhale slowly. “I’m out of luck there.”

Dove frowns, giving me a surprised and confused look. “What? No, you’re not.”

I just stare at her.

Dove’s brows knit. “Brooklyn, do you not *know*?”

“Know…what?”

She shakes her head. “Kir is friends with Ivan Yelchin. The AD.”

* * *

DOVE INSISTS on having one of her father’s men drive me home.

“Hey, it’s one less goon prowling around here making sure I don’t break out,” she’d joked dryly.

But instead of having him drop me off near Pearl, I ask him to let me out back at the Mercury Theater, where I left my bag, not to mention my share of the leftover sandwiches.

I’m tugging it all out of my locker in the darkened changing room when my phone lights up with a text.

MAYA GARZA

Fuck, dude, I got slammed with some stuff earlier and totally forgot to text you before.

MAYA GARZA

Some guy was looking for you at my apt today.

I frown at the screen.

ME

Someone from Diego’s office?

MAYA GARZA

No. He was weird.

MAYA GARZA

Fucking smoke show tho lol

ME

laughing emoji

MARYA GARZA

No, girl, like fine as FUCK. 10/10 would bang in public and let impregnate me

ME

lol

ME

Did he say who he was? Or leave a business card?

MAYA GARZA

Nope. Said he’d come back later but I got weird vibes and told him you’d be gone then, too, lol

I grin. That’s my Maya.

MAYA GARZA

Sorry, not trying to freak you out. He probably WAS with your lawyer. I just thought I’d let you know.

I thank her again, then shake my head as I heft my dance bag crammed full of leftovers onto my shoulder and finally leave for the day.

I step out the back door to the theater, and instantly jump a step back when I see him standing there, leaning against the Aston Martin.

Kir cocks his head, his eyes running over me in a way that elicits that slithering heat in my core again.

“Let’s go for a drive, Ms. Ellis.”

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8

BROOKLYN

HEAT THROBS inside me as the sleek, black sports car bombs through the neon streets of New York. Just being in the same tightly-enclosed space with this man sets me on edge.

It also weirdly puts me at total ease.

Nirvana plays quietly through the car speakers as we drive in otherwise silence. I don't know where we're going, and he hasn't volunteered that information, but somehow, I don't care. I'm certainly not worried about it.

"I wanted to check in on you," he finally murmurs in that smooth, honeyed, hormone-stoking voice.

"Oh."

Fucking *oh*?

Just kill me now.

I don't know why I'm so awkward around him. Why he makes me so nervous, so anxious in a tingly, teasing sort of way.

"Thank you again for the other night…" I swallow the lump in my throat. "*Sir*."

Fuck, why does saying that give me such a thrill?

Kir nods, his eyes on the road as we drive seemingly aimlessly through the city.

“I’d like you to try to think, now that you’ve had some time to recover from the shock, who the men who attacked you were.”

My head snaps to the side. “I-I really don’t know. Just some drunk assholes.”

Kir’s eyes tense slightly, his grip tightening on the wheel.

“And what, Ms. Ellis, were you doing alone in that neighborhood?”

It’s the mix of stern and strict blended with nurturing and protective that has my core melting just a little.

“I was meeting a friend,” I lie, forcing an embarrassed laugh from my throat. “At that strip club. Her idea,” I finish, like that somehow absolves me of any blame in this totally fictitious version of events.

“A friend,” Kir echoes.

I nod. “Yep.”

“The same friend who lives at the address you have on file with the ballet?”

My head snaps to the side, eyes widening at him in shock. Kir just calmly watches the road, driving with one hand on the wheel, the other on the stick shift.

“As in, the place where you *do not* actually live?”

Fuck. Fuckity-fuckity-fuckerton.

“I’m…in between places,” I mumble. “I’m, uh, staying on a friend’s couch for a couple of weeks. That’s all.”

I smile weakly. Kir glances over at me, a dark eyebrow cocked in a sinful way before he turns his attention back to the road.

I glance in alarm at the glowing clock on the touchscreen dash.

“I…actually need to get to work.” I frown. ”My other work. My second job.”

Kir just nods, still watching the road. “I’ll drive you.”

Shitshitshit.

This is going from bad to worse. I start to ask myself why on Earth I got into this man's car. But then I realize the answer is that he's drop dead gorgeous, and I'm the fucking idiot who would probably willingly get into the serial killer's van.

Regardless, he's obviously *not* driving me to The Mirage right now.

"Oh…" I turn to smile at him. "Thanks, but don't worry about it."

"I insist."

Goddammit.

"Well, thank you…" I swallow. "Sir."

I open my phone and quickly find a random office building in Midtown and rattle off the address. "I just started the other day," I explain.

Kir nods, turning down another street.

"So, Ms. Ellis, tell me about your interest in the *Ballet Imperiya Korona*."

My head snaps to the side, staring at him with zero chill whatsoever.

"Uh...what?" I try. *Smooth, girl. Smooth*.

Kir shoots me an amused look, making my face instantly heat.

"How… How do you know about that?" I finally ask quietly, feeling like a kid who's just been caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

"Because the Zakharova is *my* company," he says evenly. "And I like to know when dancers might be leaving." He eyes slide to me for a second. "Especially the extremely talented ones."

I feel my face burn as I quickly look down at my hands.

"You know, Ivan Yelchin and I are old friends."

My pulse quickens as I remember Dove's words.

“I know it’s a long shot,” I say quietly. “But it’s my dream to dance with that company.”

“Why?”

My lips pull into a smile.

“Because it’s the best.” I quickly recover from the fumble. “I mean, aside from the Zakharova, of course.”

Kir chuckles quietly and pulls up at a curb.

Oh. We’re here.

For some reason, I don’t want to get out of this car anytime soon. Or, like, ever.

Kir glances up doubtfully through the windshield at the huge office building.

“You work here?”

I don’t miss the suspicious note in his tone.

“Just a temp thing,” I shrug. “A spare gig to pick up some extra cash.”

Kir nods.

“Well…anyway…” I smile at him, feeling my pulse thud as those dark devil eyes slide across the dash to lock with mine.

“Thanks again…for everything,” I say quietly.

I start to turn to leave. Suddenly, Kir frowns, and his hand shoots out to cup my jaw. My breath seizes as he tips my chin up and to the side, his eyes zeroing in on my temple and his mouth tightening to a line.

“Who hits you.”

I freeze.

He’s so close.

Cupping my jaw in his hand, touching my skin.

Right in my space. Breathing my air.

The heated throb tightens in my core.

“Oh, that…” My throat bobs as I touch my temple. “It’s from those four assholes the other night. I think I must have hit it when they—”

“The bruise is older than that.” Kir’s hand releases my jaw, his eyes flickering in the dim glow of the dashboard. “It’s someone else.”

I quickly shake my head. “It’s nothing, really.”

Another pulse throbs through my lower belly before I grab the strap of my bag, open the door, and get out.

“It’s *not*,” he growls. “Why are you covering for someone who is hurting you?”

Sometimes, you just react without thinking, and then you’re left wondering why the *hell* you did what you did.

This is one of those times.

I whirl back to him, leaning down and staring at him through the open door.

“Because the *Ballet Imperiya Korona* expects talent *and* pedigree!” I blurt. “They want polish, and a classy image, and me getting mixed up with the police isn’t going to help with that!”

Shit.

There’s a moment of stunned silence after I say it, and I cringe inside.

“I… I should get going.”

“Indeed. Wouldn’t want to be late for your *temp job*,” Kir says quietly. He glances through the windshield again, up at the office building. “In the totally dark, deserted office building…at ten at night.”

I smile weakly. Kir smiles back. “I do hope you’re staying safer out there, Ms. Ellis.”

“Thank you again for the other night,” I reply quietly. “*Sir*.”

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9

BROOKLYN

I'M FILLED with dread when I enter the back door of The Mirage and head to the changing room. Mercifully, one of the girls mentions that Lou is preoccupied with a VIP room full of Bratva enforcers.

Guess I'm safe from him, at least temporarily.

I put my soggy sandwiches in the refrigerator in the little kitchenette next to the changing area, then stash the rest of my stuff in my locker. I flip through my various costumes before I settle on a "sexy policewoman" outfit that tears away with a light tug.

"Mmm. There's a retirement party out there tonight."

I turn to see Maya standing behind me, hip cocked, wearing a neon green thong bikini that contrasts gorgeously with her caramel tanned skin.

"For a headmaster at a private school." She rolls her eyes. "I'd go naughty schoolgirl for maximum cash."

I make a face. "Eww, gross?"

"Gotta get that money, girl."

Truer words, my friend.

I peel off my street clothes, slip into super-stretchy, easily pulled-away panties and a matching demi-bra, then grab the schoolgirl outfit from my costume rack.

“So, that guy who was looking for me…?”

Maya winces. “I didn't mean to scare you by putting it that way. Like, yeah, I got weird vibes, but just because I wasn’t expecting someone like that.”

I arch a brow. “*Someone like that*?”

“Like I said, hot as *fuck*,” Maya grins. “I’m not even joking. He looked rich, too. Had that air about him, and he was dressed *really* well.” She taps her chin. “Smelled nice, too.”

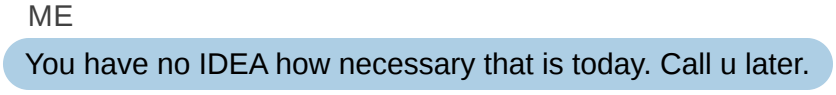
My brows knit. “Was it Roman?”

Maya frowns. “The big cute confused one who comes in sometimes?” She giggles. “No, not him.”

“Weird.”

“Don't stress about it. Like I said, he was probably someone from your lawyer.”

I’m at the vanity doing my makeup when my phone dings with a text from a friend, asking if I’d like to grab a drink after my shift's over.



* * *

MONTHS AGO, I was in a pretty bad situation. I mean, it’s not like I’m in a terrific place now, but that was *definitely* a low point. I was a few months into living in Pearl, perpetually sleep deprived, hungry, and money was *really* tight.

It wasn’t my proudest moment, but I found myself starting an OnlyFans account. I never thought I'd be on a site that almost exclusively skews toward adult content where followers can “subscribe” to a creator for pay-per-view content or certain custom photos or videos, but you do what you have to.

I figured I was already stripping, so why not? I made sure I never showed my face, never even did anything really explicit—mostly just “erotic” photoshoots with dramatic lighting, lingerie, a few partial nudes.

Eventually, it felt way too much like I was doing porn, so I stopped. No shame or judgment to the people who use it to make a living at *all*. It just wasn’t for me, and it was sending me spiraling me into a negative place.

That spiral hit its lowest point about nine months ago.

Evelina’s older brother Roman was throwing a party at their father’s house, which he does fairly frequently. A bunch of us from the Zakharova went, but while most of my friends just came to have fun, I came to *medicate*.

To numb the self-loathing and dull the sensation that my life was spinning out of control.

Eventually, I told my friends I was leaving. But instead, a few drinks in, I snuck upstairs to Mr. Nikitin’s master bathroom. He obviously wasn’t home, and desperate, semi-drunk me thought that the Bratva *pakhan’s* ultra-luxurious marble and glass bathroom would make the perfect backdrop for some pics for my OnlyFans account.

But then I started scrolling through some of the stuff I’d posted recently on the site and actually reading the comments.

“Slut.”

“What a whore”.

“10/10 would rape.”

The spiral plunged into a nose-dive that night. It was like months of feeling like complete shit about myself as a person all distilled down to one moment where I just sort of…gave up.

Stopped caring. Stopped trying to fight the overwhelming odds against me.

I remember looking out the bathroom window with tears in my eyes and seeing my friends heading out in a group as the party wound down. I’d already told them I was going home, so they weren't abandoning me or

anything, but it made me feel *so fucking alone* in the universe and just shone a huge light on the differences between their lives and mine.

That's when I found Mr. Nikitin's prescription bottle of oxycodone and took one.

Then two more. Then another three, before tucking the bottle into my pocket. I decided that *that* night was my cue to exit. To stop fighting. I didn't care if I lived anymore.

That was the rock-bottom lowest of the low points.

But right after that, sitting slumped in the empty porcelain claw-foot bathtub, I happened to turn and glance out the window at the pool in the back yard below where the party had been raging earlier.

…And saw someone floating in it.

Seeing what could literally be a dead body sobered me up and slapped me back into reality. I instantly rushed to the toilet and made myself throw up the pills, staggered downstairs, and hurled myself into the pool.

Somehow, I managed to drag the man to the shallow end and lug his considerable weight up the steps and out onto the decking.

That's when I realized it was *Roman*, Evelina's older brother.

I don't really know proper CPR, but miraculously, pounding on his chest and screaming at him to wake the fuck up brought him back to consciousness before he rolled to the side and vomited up chlorinated water and booze.

"I puked," he'd grunted in a daze, before turning and gazing at my hoodie. "Shit, did I get you?"

"Nope, that's all me."

He'd grinned a lazy, haggard smile. "That kinda night, huh?"

That was when two things happened: I pulled off my hoodie to wring the water out of it, and the oxycodone bottle fell out between us. Then Roman

yanked his phone out of his soaked pocket to let it dry on the pool deck: a phone that was open to…well, something interesting.

He awkwardly grabbed the phone, *I* awkwardly blurted something about not knowing where the Oxy came from, and we'd looked at each other sheepishly.

We've been secret friends ever since, in a weird but comforting way, and we never, *ever*, talk about that night.

"Brook."

Roman raises a hand as he calls my name from the back of the bar…as if I could miss his six-foot-five frame.

Everyone knows I go by Brooklyn, and *hate* being called "Brooky". But Roman calls me "Brook", and for some reason, I have zero problem with it.

"Hey, big guy," I smile as I sidle up to him and give him a hug, grinning when he wraps his thick arms around me.

"How was work?"

Because of the strange way we became friends, Roman and I can pretty much tell each other anything. Okay, not *anything*—he doesn't know about my current living situation, or the extent of my money issues. But he and he alone knows about The Mirage.

"Sleazy," I sigh. "There was a retirement party for a private school headmaster."

Roman makes a face. "Lemme guess, schoolgirl outfits?"

"*Allllll* night."

"Someone should probably search that motherfucker's computer."

I snicker as Roman beckons the bartender.

"What are you drinking?"

"Eh, I might just stick to water."

Roman, who's clearly already had a few, rolls his eyes. "I'm buying, Brook. What are you drinking? For real?"

He doesn't know *all* my financial woes. But he gets that a drink out is a stretch for me.

"I'd love a Pilsner, please," I smile at the bartender. When he slides it in front of me, I turn and clink my glass to Roman's. "Cheers. Thanks for the drink."

"Any time," he grunts, downing a few huge gulps of his beer before he frowns into it.

"So…" I glance at him. "Anything in particular you wanted to chat about? Or just looking to hang?"

Roman sucks on his teeth, twirling his beer on the bar in front of him.

"That…uh…" He clears his throat. "That night we don't talk about…"

"We can *continue* not talking about it," I say quietly.

Roman grimaces. "There's…" He pauses and takes another big swig. "I don't know if Evie told you, but Dad's been talking about setting me up with someone." His mouth twists as he quickly looks at me. "A girl, obviously," he grunts.

"Yeah, obviously…"

He clears his throat again and glances at me. "That night… I mean, I was pretty fucked up…"

"Tell me about it," I grin. "I think we've also established that I was too."

He gives me a half-smile before he turns back to his beer. "There may or may not have been some…I dunno…weird shit on my phone…"

I'm going to go out on a limb and assume he means Grindr, the gay casual hookup app, that his phone was open to when he pulled it out of his soaked pocket.

"I don't think I remember anything in particular," I lie, shrugging.

Roman shoots me a cagey but somewhat grateful look.

“Well, this girl my dad found… I’m probably going to be marrying her.”

My brows arch. “Woah. Con…grats?”

Roman nods slowly, looking into his drink. “And…whatever you may or may not have seen that night…” He frowns and turns toward me. “I’m *not* gay.”

I smile gently. “Sexuality is fluid, Roman.”

“Not with me,” he grunts firmly. “I’m straight, Brooklyn.”

I nod. “Okay.”

“I *am*,” he insists.

“Say it again and maybe it’ll sound truer.”

He turns to glare at me. “How’s taking your clothes off for money going?”

“Okay, *cheap shot*,” I mutter with a grin, raising a middle finger as he chuckles.

This is part of our strange dynamic. We’re each other’s secret-keepers. I haven’t wanted to tell anyone about my stripping, but I’ve told Roman because I guess I just know *I can*.

Roman sighs. “Fuck, that was low. Sorry, I don’t know why I said that.”

I lift my shoulders. “All good.”

We end up having one more drink each, then he offers to drive me home. I ask if he can give me a lift to the Mercury instead, claiming I left some stuff there.

I hit the ladies' room before we head out, and groan at the text from Diego.

DIEGO

Talked to the new forensics guy. He’s actually $17k, and he’s booking up fast. If we want him, I need to get him half his fee in the next couple of days.

Ugh.

I decide to file that under “shit I’m not going to deal with right now” and step out of the restroom. Somehow, in the four minutes I was gone, Roman’s managed to get some drunk, giggly girl on his arm.

“Brook, this is Sandy.”

“*Mandy*,” the girl laughs, turning to slap his firm chest playfully.

I give Roman a “Seriously?” look. He just shrugs.

“Look, why don’t you guys hang out,” I smile at them. “I’ll grab my own ride—”

“Nah, c’mon.”

Roman insists on driving me to the theater. The only reason I agree to get in the car with him is that even though he’s had some drinks, he’s also *huge*, and doesn’t seem intoxicated at all.

I slip into the back seat of his Mercedes G-Wagon, with Mandy-or-Sandy up front, nibbling on his neck the whole drive there.

“Thank for the lift,” I say after I get out at the theater, talking to him through his window.

“Any time, dude,” he grins.

I arch a brow, looking past him to where Mandy is taking selfies in the passenger seat. I exhale slowly. “Be…true to yourself, Roman.”

I couldn’t have Roman drive me to a parked car. But I also wanted to come to the Mercury because I *definitely* need to shower, and I didn't want to at work because Lou was giving off extra predatory vibes.

Also, I've sobered up enough and wouldn’t mind getting some extra practice in. I’m shortlisted with the *Imperiya Korona*, and have my callback in a month or two with Liliya Rostova and Ivan Yelchin when they come back to New York.

I quickly rinse off, change into dance clothes, and head to the studio. I keep the overhead fluorescents off, only flicking on the low floor lights around

the perimeter, bathing the room in a warm glow. I sink into a stretch on the floor, trying to clear my mind completely. Then I stand and approach the barre.

“You don’t work a temp job in that building.”

I almost jump out of my skin, a choked gasp sticking in my throat as I whirl toward the dark figure standing in the doorway.

Heat pulses in my core as Kir slips into the room, his eyes locked on mine.

“That’s the *last* time you lie to me, Ms. Ellis.”

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10

KIR

SHE STARES at me like terrified, cornered prey.

The strange thing, much like my inability to shake her from my thoughts, is that usually, I *relish* this sort of look when I step into a room.

Not because I'm a bully, but because I realize that when I step into a room, power comes with me. And power has a way of making people feel threatened.

But when I see that look on *Brooklyn's* face, not a single part of me enjoys it.

Quite the opposite. I don't want to intimidate this woman. Instead, there's a burning need to be the shield between her and whatever *does* scare her.

That said… I'd like some answers about the lies she keeps feeding me.

"Why did you have me drop you off at a random building the other night, claiming it was your workplace?"

She twists like a fish on a line, her sharp blue eyes avoiding mine. Her lip catches between her teeth, and I watch her roll it gently, a mix of jealousy and frustration at her lack of answers growing within me.

"Brooklyn."

"I—" Her throat bobs heavily. "I was embarrassed. I…" She shrugs and looks at the floor. "I'm kind of in between side gigs right now, so money's a

little tight.” She swallows again. “And you’re…you know.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “I’m what?”

“Rich…?”

I shake my head. “First of all—”

“Please, don’t give me a lecture on how I shouldn’t be embarrassed by poverty,” she says quietly. “I’ve heard it before and it’s…”

“Stupid?” I finish for her. “Unhelpful? Patronizing? Generally coming from a position of privilege?”

A small smile tugs at the corners of her mouth. Her bright blue eyes slowly drag up to meet my gaze, and a fire ignites within me.

“Pretty much,” she says quietly.

“I’m not here to lecture you, Brooklyn. And I’m quite aware how poverty tastes, for what it's worth.”

“It’s just…” She frowns and looks down again. “I mean, I fucking *love* ballet. It’s why I get up in the morning. It’s what I breathe. But…” She lifts a shoulder. “It’s not exactly a path to wealth.”

I shake my head. “Art rarely is.” I frown. “Are you having trouble living off what you make here?”

She looks away. “It’s not that. I mean, I didn’t become a dancer for money. It’s just…” She trails off and shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“No, keep going.”

Her lip retreats between her teeth again.

“Pretend I don't own the company.”

She snorts quietly, as if to illustrate how ridiculous an ask that is with me standing here wearing a ten thousand-dollar suit and a watch worth a cool quarter of a mill.

“I want to help you if you’re in trouble, Ms. Ellis,” I growl. “I think I’ve made that fairly obvious by now.”

Color floods into her cheeks as her eyes dart to mine.

“Thank you again for—”

“Don’t keep thanking me. Just tell me what’s going on, and why money is so tight right now.”

“It’s fine, you—”

“I’m not asking you, Brooklyn. I’m *telling* you.”

Her lips tighten, and I can see the tiniest flicker of defiance in her eyes. She doesn’t like being told what to do.

Interesting.

Or perhaps she just doesn’t like being told what to do by men who don’t know *how* to tell her.

“Family? A sick relative?” I take another step toward her, and her mouth opens slightly, her eyes widening. “You can tell me, or I can simply…find out.”

She swallows.

“My stepdad. He’s got these legal issues…he's charged with things I know he didn’t do. I’m trying to fight that.”

I lift a brow, trying to hide the bored amusement on my face.

The stepfather being charged for something he didn’t do.

Right.

Either she’s a compulsive liar, or naive enough to believe another liar.

“He *didn’t*,” she insists, her blue eyes blazing into mine.

I nod. “Go on.”

“His legal bills cost a fortune, so…” She looks away. “Sorry, overshare.”

“I asked you to.”

“I think you *told* me to.”

I smirk. “*Touché*. You understand that the *Ballet Imperiya Korona* doesn’t pay its apprentices?”

She swallows, her eyes dropping to the floor. “I do.”

“How would you continue to pay for your stepfather’s legal defense while you’re in another country, dancing for free?”

“I’ll figure it out,” she says firmly, a little too quickly.

“And if you’re unable to—”

“I said *I’ll figure it out*,” she says coldly.

I say nothing, just clasp my hands behind my back and let my eyes bore into her.

“Since we’re here,” I say evenly. “I’d like you to dance for me.”

Brooklyn’s brow furrows as her lip trembles.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re a dancer. We’re standing in a rehearsal studio at one of the finest ballet companies in the world. You’re considering pushing yourself to the absolute professional limit, not to mention the financial one, to travel halfway around the world to an even more brutal institution which won’t even pay you.”

She nods stiffly. “And?”

My eyes narrow. “*And* I’d like you to dance for me, so I can tell you if this dream of yours even has a prayer of coming true.”

I won’t lie. Part of me rather enjoys the look of fury that spreads over her face.

“I got a *callback*,” she says tightly through clenched teeth.

I lift a shoulder. “As did Lin Xiuya, Camille Blanchet, and Allegra Vitale. All *fantastic* dancers.”

Brooklyn bristles.

“You’re shooting for the *moon*,” I say tersely. “And I’d like to see you dance.”

“Why.”

My brows shoot up at her sharp reply before they settle again.

“Because I said so.”

“Because you’re friends with Ivan Yelchin.”

She’s smart, I’ll give her that.

“*No*. Because you need guidance if you want to have a shot at that position, with or without my friend being the artistic director.” My eyes narrow. “And for what it’s worth, Ivan is *above* petty favoritism.”

Brooklyn inhales sharply, stiffening as I take another step toward her.

“As am *I*,” I growl.

She chews on her lip as she eyes me. “You want me to dance?”

“I want to not repeat myself.”

What the fuck am I doing? On no level is this something I should be indulging in. Encouraging this insane dream of hers to go to Moscow is just cruel.

She won’t be going. Nor will Lin Xiuya, Camille Blanchet, or Allegra Vitale.

Inessa Moskovic will, as part of my deal with Dimitri.

So why the fuck am I humoring this girl? Probably for the same fucked up reason I can’t get her out of my goddamn head. Why I can’t resist this… *pulling* sensation dragging me closer to her, especially now, alone together in the studio.

Brooklyn intrigues me. So do her secrets, and her very obvious lies.

It's like she's daring me to discover them. Challenging me to throw the lies in her face and drag out every one of her dark little secrets.

Without waiting for an answer, I turn and march across the room toward the piano and the sound system. I shrug off my jacket, setting it carefully on top of the Steinway before I deftly roll my sleeves over my forearms to the elbow. When I glance back at her, Brooklyn is looking at me curiously.

"I assume you're familiar with the Gamzatti Temple variation from *La Bayadere*?"

The curiosity deepens around her eyes, but she nods. "I could do it in my sleep."

"No one's asking for that. Not yet, anyway. From the top."

I turn to the sound system, locate the track on the iPad plugged into it, and glance back at her.

"Ready?"

She lifts a shoulder. "Sure," she says casually.

So cocky.

It's…not an unattractive trait in her.

I tap the play button on the iPad and turn to lean casually against the piano, watching as Brooklyn begins the variation.

She was fantastic from the back of the auditorium, when I observed her through the windows of Magda's office.

Up close, she's *magnificent*.

Her phrasing, her musicality, her fluid arm movements. She nails every pirouette, every jump, every single step in the variation.

And yet…

There's something missing.

There’s no question that she’s insanely talented—I’m talking best of the best, most likely top one percent in the world. But even so, as I watch, there’s something lurking there in her every step.

Is it fear? Darkness surges in my chest as I think about the bruises I saw on her body. Not from those fucking hyenas the other night. The older ones.

The fury in me roars louder and louder the longer I watch this magical creature coming *so fucking close* to perfection, only to be dogged by the shadows haunting her steps.

I *hate* the fact that somebody stole the freeness from her dancing.

Brooklyn is launching into the diagonal piqué turns when I abruptly stop the music. She whirls on me with a fury in her face I wasn’t expecting. Then it hits me.

She’s the kind of artist who loses herself so deeply in her art that to disrupt that process before it finishes is like shoving a painter aside and spray-painting a cock across their masterpiece.

“What the *fuck*?!” she snaps.

My brow furrows deeply as I draw in a long breath.

Don’t do this.

But I’m already walking closer, my gaze critical as I slowly circle her.

“What are you doing?”

“Lift your arm, like this.”

I try to ignore the explosion that ripples through my body the second I touch her skin. But it’s like trying to ignore being electrocuted. Still, I grit my teeth and continue with my corrections, lifting her wrist to where I want it, moving my hands to her upper arm and repositioning her shoulder.

“What are you—”

“Stop talking and pay attention.”

Her eyes blaze. But her mouth snaps shut.

Good girl.

“Cheat the right leg out a bit, point the toe.” I sigh. “*Point* the toe, Brooklyn.”

“I *am* pointing it,” she mutters testily.

“I know you can point it more. I’ve seen you do it. Now, the other hand… *here*.”

I know this is wrong. I’m crossing several lines. But I can’t stop.

I keep one hand on her right hip as I move around to her left. My arm circles her small waist, feeling the muscles expand and contract as she breathes against my touch. I lift her left hand, checking the line in the mirror before my fingers trace back down her forearm to the elbow.

The position has me right against her back, her tight ass against my thigh, my arm mirroring her raised one and touching her elbow, the other hand wrapped around her waist and hip.

“Like that,” I breathe, almost directly into her ear. “Now, take it from right before the piqués.”

I pull away from her sharply. I have to.

I’m fucking *hard*.

I march back over to the iPad and glance back at her. “When I hit play, I want you to count yourself in and then go straight into it. Don’t pause like you were before. There’s no pause, Brooklyn. The *piqués* lead directly into the pirouette *en dehors*.”

Brooklyn opens her mouth to say something, but I shake my head.

“No questions. Just *do* it.”

I tap play again. She counts herself in and goes right into it. But she keeps that goddamn pause right before the pirouette.

“Stop.”

She whips her head around, glaring at me without a trace of a filter when I abruptly stop the music.

“Again, from the same place.”

“I didn’t—”

“You did. Don’t question me, Ms. Ellis.”

She glares at me. I glare right back.

“Is that *clear*?”

“Yeah,” she snaps.

My mouth purses as my gaze holds hers captive. “Excuse me?”

A blush tinges her cheeks.

“I mean, yes, that’s clear…*sir*.”

Fuck.

My cock really, *really* needs to calm the hell down when she says that.

“Again. And…go.”

I tap play, and the whole thing starts again. This time, she nails it, and goes directly into the pirouette *en dehors*. So when I abruptly pause the music again, there’s pure wrath on her face when she whirls on me.

“What the *fuck*?!” she hisses. “I *had* that!”

“Yes, you did,” I growl, narrowing my eyes. “Now you can do it without someone holding your hand.”

I’m not trying to be an asshole. But I know the *Imperiya Korona*, and this is nothing compared to the whip-cracking that goes on there.

But again, the thought lodges and then crumbles in my head.

She won’t be dancing in Moscow.

She won’t get the apprenticeship.

I clear my throat. “From the top. Go.”

I tap play, relishing the way she shoots me one more glare and then slips into position. She nails the transition perfectly again. But once she’s made it through that part, I stop the music and make her start from the top of the variation again.

Then a third time.

With no breaks.

By the time I’m done with her, she’s collapsed on the floor, panting, her body trembling with exertion. The ragged sound of her breathing fills the studio as I grab a bottle of water from the mini fridge next to the piano and walk over to hand it to her, still down on the floor.

“Better.”

She glares up at me, her skin shining with sweat in a way that makes my hands twitch and my stomach clench.

“How do you know so much about ballet?” she wheezes.

“I own this company,” I say quietly. “In case you and your tone had forgotten.”

She frowns. “Plenty of rich pampered assholes own art galleries. That doesn’t make them painters.”

I smirk.

I like this fire in her. Maybe too much.

…*Definitely* too much.

“Well, *this* particular rich pampered asshole happens to know quite a bit about ballet.” My eyes stab into hers. “You have a *shot*,” I growl. “But you need to conquer your fear.”

“I’m not afraid of—”

She gasps as I surge right into her, looming.

A smirk tugs at my mouth. “You were saying?”

“*Fuck you—*”

“Language, Ms. Ellis.”

Her mouth snaps shut, and she bristles.

“I’m not *scared*. You attacked me. That’s a natural response. But kung fu or *krav maga* or whatever that was isn’t ballet,” she hisses.

I slowly shake my head. “Ballet is war. It is merciless, it is unforgiving, and it is kill or be killed. If that’s not war…” I look away. “I don’t know what is.”

Brooklyn eyes me, sucking on her bottom lip.

Don’t say it. Don’t do this. You will regret it.

“I can work with you, Brooklyn.”

Fuck. I said it.

She blinks in surprise as she looks up at me. “What?”

“You’ll continue as usual during the day with Magda—with Madame Kuzmina, that is,” I say. “But after that, you and I will have one-on-one coaching. I will hone your near-perfect skills into *actual* perfection.”

She smiles a little. “Seriously?”

“Yes.” I lean down close to her. “Are you prepared to work hard?”

She nods vigorously. “Yeah, I am.”

“There will be rules, Brooklyn.”

“Such as?” she drawls sarcastically.

“Such as dropping that sass, for a start,” I growl. “No more swearing like a goddamn sailor. And being prepared to go into battle. If you think you can manage those, I can break you of your fear.”

The studio goes pin-drop silent, then slowly, Brooklyn starts to nod.

“I think I can manage those.”

“*Good girl*.”

That’s something else I’m starting to relish: that blush that creeps over her face and neck whenever I say that. Or when she calls me “sir”.

And yes, I’m *very* aware how dangerous that is, especially as we move into this madness of me coaching her alone after hours.

“Let’s take the variation again from the top.”

I reach down, taking her hand and pulling her to her feet. She gasps a little when I yank her up so fast that she almost falls into me. But she catches herself, still blushing as she looks away.

I march back over to the iPad and turn to her. “Ready?”

Brooklyn nods and rolls her shoulders. “Yeah.”

“Go.”

This time, it’s even better: what I’m correcting are really the minutest details. But those details are the difference between very good and fucking *perfection*.

“Again.”

When she’s finished, I have her start all over again, going through the variation a second time.

“Again.”

And a third.

“Do not let that wrist collapse!” I bark as she moves into her fourth crack at the variation.

I step away from the piano, moving right over to her and walking backward next to her, following her every step and movement with a critical eye.

“The piqué!” I shout over the music as it swells. My pulse thuds as she twirls, her face a mask of concentration, her body twisting, spinning, her

muscles flexing.

“Now the pirouette! Right into it!”

Her muscles work, tendons coiling, her skin sweat-slicked, her entire body a masterpiece of anatomy and grace as she nails the pirouette *en dehors*.

“Keep going!” I bark. “Full concentration!”

She twirls, dips and spins—and suddenly, her foot slips out from under her, pulling a choked cry from her lips.

I’m there instantly, my hands scooping underneath to catch her and stop her from falling…

…Right into my arms.

The music keeps playing, but suddenly, her palms are flat against my chest, our faces barely six inches apart.

Her eyes are wild and shining. Her breath is coming quickly, and I can feel the erratic staccato thud of her pulse just under her skin where my hands are clasping her back.

Time stops.

Everything stops.

And then suddenly, so fast that I don’t see it coming, Brooklyn’s lips are crashing to mine.

Kissing me.

For a second, it’s chaos. A riot of beauty, insanity, and need. My hands tighten on her back, as if to crush her to my chest and never let go. My lips open, and she whimpers breathlessly as my tongue slides into her mouth, tangling with hers.

She sinks against me. Her pulse goes fucking haywire as I growl into her mouth and kiss her like she’s fucking mine.

…Except, she’s not.

She’s a dancer at the company I own. She’s *twenty* fucking years my junior. And she’s looking for a shot at an opportunity she thinks I can give her.

Which I can’t.

With a growl rumbling in my chest, I shove us apart, wrenching my mouth from hers and stepping away.

Brooklyn’s face crumples, her eyes widening when she sees the dark fury in mine.

“Don’t ever do that again,” I say quietly, my voice black as night.

Without another word, I turn and walk out of the studio.

I have to.

If I don’t, I’ll gather her back into my arms, and neither of us will ever let go.

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11

BROOKLYN

Good girl.

Fuck. Even just replaying those words *purring* from his sinful lips in that absurdly hot accent sends pulses of heat through my core.

But with the giggly, blushing little tingles come other things, too. Like the utter embarrassment at having fucking *kissed* him.

Yeah, that happened.

What I don't get is why the billionaire criminal kingpin who happens to *own* the ballet company I dance for offered to coach me. It would be laughable except for the inexplicable fact that Kir *really does* seem to know his shit when it comes to ballet.

Which is…unexpected.

I meant what I said. There are plenty of rich guys in New York who fund galleries or concert venues or orchestras, because it's a tax write-off and a feather in their cap that tells people they're not just rich, they're *patrons of the arts*.

Barf. Even though that's literally how all art, ever, has been funded.

But Kir managed to torpedo that idea in about three seconds when it became abundantly clear that he was extremely well versed in ballet technique. To the point where his coaching, though harsh and demanding, was *perfectly* spot on.

Part of me wants to shake off everything he said as bullshit or him just trying to lord it over me. But the professional dancer in me knows every single thing he said to me is exactly what Madame Kuzmina would have said, too.

So how the fuck does Kir know so much about ballet? You don't get that knowledge just by buying a company and watching a few performances a year.

But today, same as last night when I was huddled in the back of Pearl, trying to stop my pulse from hammering and my thoughts from racing, I don't get too far trying to puzzle that out.

Nope, I veer off track pretty quickly to the much more pressing item: the small fact that I fucking kissed him.

And he kissed me back.

Hard. Possessively. Consumingly. He kissed me in a way I have *never* been kissed before. Whatever it was…*fuck*… I want more of it.

Even though that *cannot* happen again.

For one, he's, well, *him*: the head of a Bratva criminal empire. Something like twenty years older than me, if sickeningly gorgeous. If you want to get picky about it, he's *kind of* my boss, too.

But the even more burning reason why what happened last night is filling me with shame and embarrassment as much as a throbbing, tingly heat is the fact that Kir's friends with Ivan Yelchin.

If I put myself in his shoes, it looks even worse: a much younger, desperate girl throwing herself at him because of his personal connections which could help her achieve her dream.

Fucking *cringe*.

Like, just shoot me. I know exactly why he shoved me away last night with so much scorn in his eyes. There he was, offering to legitimately help me, and I went right to "I'll fuck you for a ticket to my dream".

Ugh.

The idea of ever seeing Kir again, much less having another intimate, one-on-one coaching session with him, makes my stomach churn and my ego crumble to dust. Even though that is *not* why I kissed him.

I kissed him because…well, let's blame temporary insanity. But also, I got swept up in it all. The dancing. The light touches. The commanding tone telling me exactly what to do, and when. The low lighting. Fuck *me*, the "good girls". The fact that Kir's an *outrageously* attractive man, and when I slipped and fell into him like that, I just… I don't know. Went stupid.

Lost control.

"Brooklyn."

In the alley behind the theater, I blink away my thoughts when I hear my name. I glance up and grin when I see Val marching toward me, dragging a wide-eyed, stunned-looking Evelina.

"What's…uh, what's going on?" I arch a brow, glancing at Val with a reproachful look, then at Evie with a softer one. "Is this man harassing you, ma'am?"

Val flips me off. "Dude, I'll return you so fast."

I snort a laugh.

That's our in-joke. Like me, Val went through the foster system in New York when he was a kid. I really can't tell if it makes it better or worse that he has no recollection of his life before foster care, because of an accident that left him with some memory loss.

He's only just recently been reintroduced to an older brother that he never knew he had. I'm not sure how close they are, even though they've been catching up a lot: Val is a party-boy with an insatiable appetite for bedding strangers of either sex. Vaughn, on the other hand, is "the Marquis": the mysterious new leader of a shadowy criminal organization called the Obsidian Syndicate.

I would imagine that "catching up with your brother over coffee" might be strained in terms of common interest.

But getting back to our “I’ll return you” joke: it’s gallows humor about foster care. If you fuck up, you’re going to get “returned” like badly fitting pants.

Val, dressed in black jeans and a baggy sleeveless t-shirt with huge armholes that show off his chiseled arms and some of his grooved torso, all covered with an array of tattoos, clears his throat. He grins wickedly as he leans against the brick wall, glancing at Evelina.

“Guess what Evie saw.”

Poor Eveline turns a spectacular shade of crimson.

I frown. “Do I want to know?”

“*Oh, hell yeah*,” Val snickers.

I put my arm protectively around Evie. “Everything okay?”

Despite growing up as a literal Bratva princess—or maybe because of it—Evie is *extremely* sheltered. Like the girl gets beyond flustered just hearing the word “penis”, which is endlessly amusing to Val.

She sighs heavily. “I didn’t *mean to*,” she whispers. “I just wanted to come in early and use one of the stationary bikes downstairs, and…” She blushes again and buries her face in her hands.

I turn to glare at Val. “What the fuck? What did she see?”

He grins. “*Kir*, in just a pair of shorts, working out in the weights room.”

I feel a tingle ripple through me, and instantly, the replay of that kiss last night roars into my mind.

The tight grip of his hands on my sweaty back. The taste of his lips. His raw, masculine scent. The feel of his tongue capturing mine.

“Of all the fucking people,” Val sighs. “And it’s wasted on Ms. Prude here.”

“I am *not*!” Evie squeaks. “I just…” She takes a breath. “I wasn’t *expecting* it, that’s all. So it…rattled me.”

“Prude.”

She shoots Val a dark look. “Am *not*.”

“Cock. Cum. Wet pussy.”

Evie shrinks against me, groaning as her face suffuses with heat. Val, of course, thinks this is the funniest fucking thing in the world.

“Hey, enough.” I poke him, grinning. “Leave poor Evie alone.”

“Okay, okay.” He sighs and reaches out to lift Evelina’s chin, raising her eyes to his. “I kid because I’m jealous.”

She grins.

“I mean…shredded, right?”

She blushes. “He’s…got a lot of muscles.”

Val’s grin turns lecherous. “What about package?”

She frowns. “Package?”

Oh, sweet, sweet Evie.

“Like, do you think he was freeballing in his shorts? Any chub going on?”

It suddenly clicks with Evie, and her face turns purple as her eyes go wide. “Oh my *God*, Val!” she squeals. “Don’t be so gross!”

Val erupts in laughter as I punch him in the shoulder.

“Dude, I’m going to return you so fucking hard.”

* * *

MY FRIENDS really are the best. Even with all the stuff swirling through my head about the kiss, and Kir in general, Val and Evie’s antics manage to take my mind off it. The rehearsal day is its usual blur of Kuzmina’s own brand of punishment, then I end up getting a coffee with Milena down the street and catching up on everything that’s been going on with her and Nero De Luca, the head of the De Luca mafia family. She’s recently told us she’s in a *very* serious relationship with him, and I’m happy for her.

After that, though, it’s time to face the music.

Dread pools in my stomach as I approach the back door of The Mirage for my shift. I managed to dodge Lou yesterday, but I know he’s not one to let things go.

He made it clear the other night what he wants, and he’s not going to forget about it.

I shudder, pausing at the back door.

Am I really going back in there?

I exhale slowly, resting my forehead tiredly against the wall next to the door. I could just…*not*. I could turn, walk away, and never come back to this hellhole.

But then I feel the hunger pangs in my stomach, and the way my toes chafe against the worn interior of my shoes. I think about my bed tonight being the back seat of an Accord. About Derrick, languishing in jail for a crime he didn’t commit. About forensic accountants who cost seventeen fucking grand.

Fuck.

Resignation stabs into me, and I go to open the back door. Just then, I hear the crunch of tires on gravel behind me.

“Brooklyn.”

I instantly tense, confusion, panic, and raw fear flooding my veins at the sound of James’s voice. My throat dries as I turn, looking at him idling his banged-up Mustang, his arm hanging out through the window. He leers at me with a look that’s half-creepy, half-angry as he shakes his head.

“The fuck you doing here?” he grunts.

“I…” I swallow through the sandpaper in my mouth. “I just…”

“I thought you were quitting this fucking place.”

I bristle. “What are you doing here, James?”

“I asked you a fucking question,” he snaps. “I mean what the fuck, Brooklyn? Is it that you *like* being a fucking whore?”

“*Fuck you*!” I snap. “I’m not—”

Holy shit.

I snap my mouth shut, my stomach churning with sheer panic at what I’ve just said to him. I’ve never raised my voice like that to him before.

James’s face darkens. “The *fuck* did you just say, cunt?”

“James, I’m sorry,” I blurt, deflating. Feeling pathetic and scared. “I—I have to get to work—”

“Get the fuck in the car.”

Ice slides through my veins. James’s eyes pull to slits.

“I said get the *fuck* in the car!” he roars, banging his hand on the outside of his door. “Fuckin’ *now*, bitch!”

When I don’t move—I can’t, I’m too terrified—he hisses and slams the car into park. I’m shaking like a leaf as he steps out, leaving the door open and storming over to me.

“Are you fucking *deaf*?” he snaps, grabbing me and bringing a choked cry to my lips. “Well?!”

“James—!”

“You wanna be a whore, Brooklyn?” He rasps. “That it?”

Horror slams into me, my blood running cold as he spins me around and slams me hard against the wall.

“*Fine*,” he snarls. I finch, feeling his fist rushing toward me. But instead of hitting me, he shoves two crumpled twenties in my face. “You wanna be a fucking whore,” he hisses, “you can be *my* fucking whore.”

Pure horror explodes through me as he jams my legs apart with his knee.

“James!!”

I hear the metallic jangle of his belt buckle, then feel the awful, sickening invasion of his hand under my skirt, groping and grabbing at my ass. His fingers slip under the edge of my underwear, trying to yank them to the side as I scream and flail against him. But he's so much stronger, and bigger. All it does is earn me a slap on the cheek before he roughly pushes my face against the bricks.

"Be a good whore for me, you fucking—"

"The fuck?!"

The door next to us slams open, and *Lou* of all fucking people storms out. James instantly springs away, warily eyeing Lou and the baseball bat in his hands.

Lou turns to glare death at me. "The fuck is this?"

"Lou, I'm sorry, he—"

"You trying to turn fucking tricks in my goddamn *parking lot*, Brooky?"

I swallow the bile that rushes up my throat. "*No*! He just tried to—"

Get the fuck inside," he snarls. "You're late." Then he turns to James, hefting the bat in his hand menacingly. "And *you*, fuck-face. Get the fuck outta here. You wanna cop a feel of the merchandise, come through the front door, pay the cover charge, and buy a fucking lap dance like everyone else, okay?"

James glares murderously at me. "This ain't over, Brooklyn."

I'm caught between Lou and James.

Talk about a rock and a hard place.

But the hard place doesn't look like he might try to literally kill me, or smack the shit out of me and leave me bloodied and aching.

So it's the hard place, aka Lou, that I slip behind.

"Fucking slut," James spits. "This ain't over. Not at *all*."

He turns and storms back to his car, slamming the door and burning rubber as he peels out of the parking lot.

“Lou—”

I choke as he grabs my elbow and yanks me inside. He doesn’t say a word, and I can barely think with all the adrenaline still roaring through my system, so I don’t even realize what’s happening until Lou is banging the office door closed behind us and locking it with a horrifying click.

Oh God.

“*Lou—*”

He grabs me, shoving me backward until my ass hits the edge of his desk.

“Lou!” I scream and flail, trying to shove him off me as he paws my body, roughly pinching my breasts and my ass and trying to kiss my neck. “Stop it!” I yell. “Get the fuck—”

Pain explodes through my face as the back of his hand connects with my cheek. I blink back tears as he violently spins me around and roughly shoves me face-down across his desk.

“You wanna be a little whore?” he wheezes, his breathing labored as I hear him unbuckle his belt. “Not before I get a fuckin’ taste, slut.”

I go numb. Everything shuts down. I can’t fight, can’t do anything except lie there helplessly across the messy desk, inhaling the scent of B.O. and cheap cigars as Lou shoves up my skirt and grabs the back of my panties.

He yanks them down to my knees, and I flinch, curling in on myself at the grotesque feel of his hand cupping my sex from behind.

“Get ready, Brooky,” he breathes into my ear, leaning over me. The stench of his breath makes my stomach heave, and a tear trickles down my cheek as his fingers poke and prod around my vagina. “Get wet for me, baby. Yeah, you like that, don’t you…little fucking slut.”

I hear his pants hit the ground, and suddenly, it rips from my throat out of nowhere.

“*I have chlamydia*!!!”

Lou jerks away from me so fast he almost falls over backward.

“The *fuck*!?” he hurls at me, retching. “Goddamn fuckin’ whore! Jesus Christ!”

He yanks his pants up and shuffles over to the small sink next to the wet bar near his desk. He makes another choking sound as he turns on the water and starts violently scrubbing his hands.

I’m still shaking, bent over the desk, positive I’m going to pass out or throw up at any second. I reach down and pull my panties back up with trembling fingers. Somehow, I push myself away from the desk.

Lou whirls on me with fury in his eyes. “Fucking *whore*!” he spits violently. “I coulda caught something from that fucking cunt! Jesus!”

He angrily buckles his belt again and glares at me before he marches over to the door and yanks it open. “Get the fuck outta my office.”

Gladly.

I shuffle past him, still wincing at the pain between my legs where he jammed his fingers into me.

“Go shake your fucking ass,” he spits. “And get that shit *fixed*!”

The door slams in my face, and I exhale a broken, shattered breath.

“The fuck was that?”

Jesus. Not another man who wants to hurt me, please.

Slowly I turn, looking up into Zak’s face. The head bouncer scowls at me.

“What were you doing in there?”

“I—” I can barely think, let alone speak right now. I can’t focus on anything but the horror rampaging through my psyche, the lingering ache of Lou’s fingers, and the self-loathing burning like acid in my veins.

“Were you *fucking* him?”

“Zak, please,” I croak. “I just want to go work—”

“Answer me!” He grabs my shoulders and slams me back against the wall, making me wince. “I thought we were gonna hang out sometime, Brooklyn!”

“Zak, *please*,” I choke. “Not now—”

“Did you fuck him?” he growls. “Or were you in there sucking his dick for the good shifts? I know you sluts all do that.”

I can’t do this anymore. I can’t stand here and smile and say the nice things so the violent man doesn’t lose his cool and hurt me. I can’t stand here and “just take it” because it’s the easier option.

I just fucking *can’t*.

“Get out of my way, Zak,” I groan. “I need to get to work—”

The punch knocks me sideways off my feet, sending me sprawling to the floor as black speckles dot my vision. Throbbing pain radiates through my face, down my jaw, even into my hands as I lie there in shock and agony and horror, panting against the floor.

Zak spits on the ground next to me.

“Fuck you, slut.”

I blink back tears as his footsteps retreat heavily down the hall, the combined scents of body lotion, perfume, testosterone, smoke, and alcohol making me gag as the sickening beat of the music I’ll have to shed my dignity to very soon pounds in my throbbing head.

I can’t do this anymore.

I’m sinking fast. And if I can’t find something to hold onto, I’m going to drown.

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12

KIR

FROM THE SHADOWY UPPER BALCONY, I watch as she glides across the stage. Magda barks a command from the middle of the fourth row—her usual spot from which she directs her dancers—and the whole company stops and gets ready to run the scene again from the top.

As involved as I am with the Zakharova, it's rare for me to sit in on rehearsals. Those are Magda's domain. Which is partly why I'm sitting up *here*, cloaked in the shadows, watching the dancers.

Well, not dancers, plural.

One dancer, singular.

I understand that I've already crossed a major line with her, and that being here is only fueling a fire within me that *should not* be stoked.

But I'm here because of a lie I keep telling myself, which is that my interest in Brooklyn Ellis is professional. That I see a tremendously talented dancer who just needs a small nudge to go from very good to great.

To be honest, I *am* interested in helping her achieve greatness. She's phenomenal, but there's so much potential being wasted. She doesn't follow through. She hangs back when she should keep going, figuratively speaking. There's a fear in her that prevents her from taking that final leap.

But helping her push past that is not my lone focus. Not when the taste of her lips still lingers in my brain, keeping me up at night.

…In more ways than one.

I feel my cock swell as my mind replays her lips searing to mine. Remembers the softness of them, her tongue swirling against mine.

With a flinch, I try for the millionth time since it happened to shove those thoughts away.

No. She's too young. She's too *pure*.

And I'm a fucking plague.

I take a slow, deep breath.

I'll keep coaching Brooklyn. Even if that spot in Moscow she covets so much is off the table, I'll continue what we started. Talent that rare deserves to be nurtured, and supported, and stoked like a fire.

But everything else?

I blow out a breath as I watch her spin across the stage.

It has to stop.

* * *

I WAIT for her to leave so that I can talk to her without any of the other dancers around. They're an insanely gossipy bunch.

Eventually, even Magda has gone home for the night, but I still haven't seen Brooklyn leave.

I make a quick tour of the theater. The rehearsal studios are empty. So is the gym downstairs where Evelina Nikitin, unfortunately, saw me lifting weights without a shirt on earlier. Poor girl ran out red as a beet.

Finally, there's only one place I haven't checked.

Brooklyn shrieks, whirling and yanking the towel around her wet body as I step into the women's changing room. Her eyes bulge, staring at me as I stand impassively by the door, staring right back at her.

“You—!” She sucks in a gasping breath. “You can’t be in here!”

“I own the building, Ms. Ellis.” I pause, then clear my throat. “I’d like to address what happened yesterday.”

She starts to open her mouth, but I shake my head. “Let me finish. I’d like to continue to…coach you. I cannot and will not promise you the *Imperiya Korona* apprenticeship. But I *can* promise to remove whatever obstacle it is that’s stopping you from—”

One second, I’m trotting out the little speech I’ve rehearsed seven times. The next, she’s turning slightly, and the overhead lights catch what I thought was a shadow around her eye.

It’s…not a shadow.

Brooklyn gasps sharply as I surge across the room, right into her personal space. She whimpers when I grab her jaw, twisting her head to the side and angling her face better into the light.

Pure rage ignites like napalm inside me, venom spreading through my soul.

“Who *the fuck* hit you.”

The words erupt more viciously than I meant. But there’s no reeling them back in. No taming my rage. No tamping down my fury.

Brooklyn shakes under my grip, her lip trembling as her eyes slide to mine.

“It’s...nothing. Really.”

I shake my head. “Extinguish your ideas of the *Imperiya Korona* giving a fuck about *pedigree* for one goddamn second.”

She swallows heavily, her breath coming in short, quick bursts as I keep her jaw between my fingers.

“I’m not asking again, Ms. Ellis.”

She pulls back slightly, my hand sliding from her skin when she tugs the towel a little tighter around her body.

“I fell. It’s nothing.” She forces a tight laugh. “It’s funny, really. I was—”

“*Stop*,” I growl. “I’ve been boxing for longer than you’ve been alive.” I nod my chin at her eye. “*That* is not from a fall. That’s a punch. And you’re going to tell me who the fuck threw it.”

She pales, wetting her lips nervously.

I soften my tone as best I can. “Was it someone at work? Your other work, I mean.” She stiffens. “Brooklyn—”

“I need that job, okay?” she says hoarsely. “It was just an accident.”

“Tell me the *accident’s* fucking name,” I growl.

“*Please*.”

I don’t enjoy it, but I force myself to ignore the pleading tone in her voice and not see the desperation in her eyes. I understand that Brooklyn’s financial situation is bad right now, I really do. But there’s no way in hell I’m letting this go.

“*Please*, just—”

“Where else do you work, Brooklyn.”

Her face scrunches up, her lip retreating between her teeth.

“*Tell me*.”

Her eyes drop to the floor between us.

“I…I cocktail waitress at a club,” she says quietly.

“Which. One.”

Her brow caves, her eyes still glued to the floor. “*Please*...”

“Just tell me where—”

“Look,” she snaps, looking up at me. “I know you never have to worry about where your next custom-tailored suit comes from, or how you're going to pay for it. But I have that worry before *every fucking meal*.” Her chin thrusts out defiantly and proudly. “I can handle myself.”

“And you can give me the name of the club, or I can follow you for as long as it takes, until I figure it out.”

Her face falls. Again, I soften my voice.

“I won’t get you in trouble with your employer. That’s not my goal. But you’re going to tell me the name of this place, Brooklyn.”

She looks down at her hands.

“The Mirage, in Greenpoint.”

My brows knit. “That’s…”

Fucking hell.

Viciousness growls inside me when the penny drops.

“I just waitress there,” she blurts. “*Please*. I really, really need—”

“I won’t do a thing to jeopardize your job.”

I lift her chin with the back of my knuckles, bringing her eyes to mine. She looks so alone right now. So at the mercy of the world. It brings out this compulsion in me to shield her from anything and everything.

…Starting with whoever the *fuck* laid hands on her at that fucking place.

“I wasn’t lying before, Brooklyn,” I say quietly. “I do understand what it means to be desperate. To go hungry. More than you know.” I take a deep breath. “Go home. We’ll begin again tomorrow after your rehearsal day is done.”

Her brow furrows. “I have work—”

“You’ll skip it.”

Her lips twist unhappily. “I…*really* can’t.”

“*Can’t* is no longer in your vocabulary.” My eyes harden. “Do you want this? Perfection, I mean.”

“Will perfection get me the *Imperiya Korona*?”

I flinch inwardly at the sharp sensation stabbing into my chest.

“It can’t hurt.”

She smiles weakly and nods. “Then I want it.”

“Good. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I’m suddenly very aware just how much I’m looming over her, right in her personal space. My gaze drags over her, lingering on the little droplets of water from the shower slowly trickling down her blonde locks. The dewy softness of her cheeks. The strong lines of her neck and shoulders, above the towel wrapped around her body.

The swell of her pert breasts under that towel.

The scent of her shampoo.

The fullness of her lips and the sweetness—

I whirl away from her.

“That will be all for now,” I growl sternly. “Don’t be late tomorrow, and don’t waste my time.”

I only get two steps away before her voice stops me.

“Are you being a dick because of what happened the other night? Or—”

She startles when I abruptly turn back to her.

“What happened the other night *won’t* be happening again,” I admonish her. “Is that clear?”

Her face goes from slightly embarrassed to outright insulted.

“*Excuse me*?”

“What you pulled the other night—”

“Oh, *fuck you*!” she spits.

“*Language*, Ms. Ellis.”

She just glares at me.

“Are we clear on the terms of the arrangement?”

Her lips curl into a sneer. “*Crystal*,” she snaps. “Trust me, that will *not* be a problem.”

My eyes narrow. “I don’t know what sort of arrangement you typically have with a man you need something from—”

“*Fuck you—*”

She shudders as I storm right back into her, grabbing her jaw in my hand.

That fucking mouth.

Brooklyn shivers, a breathy little sound tumbling from her lips. Her pulse throbs erratically under my fingers brushing against her throat, and when her eyes lock with mine…

God help me.

All I want to do is pin her to the locker, rip the fucking towel away, and bury my swollen cock in her cunt until all she knows is the feel of my claim on her.

But I can’t do that.

I won’t.

My hand drops from her jaw. Slowly, with the concentration and focus of a fucking Zen monk, I back away, trying not to focus on her chest heaving under the towel, her flushed cheeks, or the tempting way her full lips are parted.

“To answer your question,” I growl, “I’m *not* being a dick because of the other night.” I look at her coldly. “I’m just kind of an asshole in general.”

I turn and leave. Because if she says another goddamn word or looks at me for one more second with those sinfully innocent eyes, there’s no power on Earth that will keep me from her.

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13

KIR

I IGNORE the low whistles and “sweet ride” comments from a couple of guys sitting astride Harleys as I step out of the Aston Martin and glare murderously up at the neon sign: “The Mirage” in 1980’s Miami pink and turquoise, with “GIRLS GIRLS GI-LS” flashing underneath it.

Inexplicable fury at this development surges inside me. But I do nothing to tamp it down. As if I could, anyway, with the rage every flicker of that fucking sign brings out.

She works at a fucking *strip club*.

“I just waitress there.”

I take in the whole sleazy dump—the men smoking and drinking beers outside, lecherously discussing the girls inside. The shady characters on motorcycles or leaning out of muscle or street racing cars.

She could be this place’s fucking *accountant*, and I’d hate it.

My anger isn’t directed at her, of course. Just at the circumstances that would force a girl like her to work at a place like this.

A meat market. A place for men to come and let out their inner predator. A place that swallows up girls in tough situations and spits out the bones when it’s done.

An overly muscled bouncer with long hair and a ludicrous tribal tat all over the right side of his face and curling around his eye nods to me as I

approach the front door.

“Twenty bucks cover charge. Two drink minimum—”

“I’m looking for a girl who was here last time I came in,” I say with a tight smile, cutting him off. “Blonde, blues eyes, about yea tall...”

I frown, remembering the night I took her home, when I saw…well, everything.

“A tattoo of ballet slippers on her ankle,” I add, remembering the ink I spotted when I cleaning her up.

I fucking hate the guy's lascivious grin of recognition.

“Oh, you mean Cherry.”

I scowl. “Cherry.”

“Cherry Pie,” he grunts. “That’s her name here.”

Why the fuck does that sound like a goddamn stripper name…

“Her, yes,” I growl, biting back savage blackness.

“Yeah, she ain’t working tonight, buddy. One sec—” He glances past me and grins. “Laaaadies! How we doin’?”

I step aside for the extremely loud, extremely *drunk* group of women, including one wearing a sash proclaiming “BRIDE TO BE!” and a tiara made of pink dildos.

A bachelorette party. Great.

The fucker on the door is, of course, eye-fucking the lot of them and trying to be his version of charming. But pretty quickly, as the women give him shit about checking their IDs, inquire about a VIP table while simultaneously complaining about the cover charge, and finally ask if *he* will be “taking his thing out”, his charm drops to zero.

I know his type. Women, or indeed anyone he deems beneath him, are only there for his enjoyment or entertainment. The second they *aren’t* entertaining or enjoyable, he goes right back to not giving a shit about them.

Eventually, scowling, he ushers them inside and kicks the door shut behind them. I seize my opportunity.

“Fucking women,” I groan. “Am I right?”

The guy shakes his head darkly. “For *real*, brother.” He turns and spits on the ground. “Sometimes you just gotta lay hands, know what I'm sayin’?”

He grins at me. I don’t grin back.

I bite back the desire to break his face as I stick out a hand. “Kevin.”

“Zak,” he grunts, shaking my hand. “Bro, just quickly…” He leans close. “Can I tell you something about that chick you're looking for?”

My jaw clenches. “By all means,” I mutter.

“Total whore, brother. Bitch has been leading me on for months. You know the type. Well, she gets mouthy the other night…” He sucks his teeth and leans back on his heels, folding his arms smugly over his chest. “Let’s just say, she knows her place and the right way to speak to a man now. Know what I’m sayin’?”

That I do, motherfucker.

I don’t trust myself to say anything. Not yet. Instead, I grin, hand Zak the twenty-dollar cover charge, and step into the club.

The rage from before resurfaces when I sweep my eyes over the dimly lit interior. More pink and turquoise neon illuminates a stage with three poles and a catwalk that runs out between the small, round tables. Barstools rim the stage, with surly men guzzling beer leering at and cat-calling a brunette on stage swaying her hips.

The fucking place smells like cigars, beer, and broken dreams.

“Excuse me, baby.”

I turn, letting a waitress with a tray of beers walk by me and toward a table of rowdy men.

She’s wearing a thong bikini bottom and stiletto boots. Nothing else.

“I just waitress there.”

My vision blurs with rage and I have to remind myself to breathe.

Brooklyn will *not* be coming back to this fucking cesspit.

I force myself to concentrate on what I came here to do. I scan the interior and spot only three security cameras: one pointed at the bar, another at the stage, and a third aimed down the hallway toward the VIP rooms. That’s it.

There are two other bouncers in here besides Fuckhead out front. But they’re barely paying attention to anything but the tits on stage. One of them is even having a beer, for fuck’s sake.

This will be almost too easy.

Just the same, I stumble by them one at a time, pretending I’m drunk and using my slurred “Whoa, sorry, man” to get close enough to cut the wires from their radios to their earpieces with my knife.

I clear the restroom next, then head back outside and clap Zak on the shoulder.

“Couple of guys fighting in the men’s room.” I shrug. “Figured you might want to know.”

He swears under his breath before he thumbs his radio. “Sean! Terence! We got a problem in the men’s room. Deal with it.”

Unsurprisingly, he gets no reply, since Sean and Terence's earpieces aren't working.

Zak’s face fills with what I assume is steroid-fueled anger and thumbs his radio again. “Sean! Terry!” he barks. “Stop watching the girls and *do your fucking job*!”

Still no answer. By now Zak looks like he's ready to kill.

“*Fuck*!” he snarls, whirling back to me. “Look…Kevin, was it?”

“That’s me.”

He exhales. “I hate to ask, brother, but…you think you could stay out here by the door for a minute while I deal with this? Anyone shows up, just tell them it’s a ten-minute wait to get in. I’ll have the manager comp your drinks all night.”

I smile. “No problem at all.”

He grins. “Appreciate it, man.”

I give him about a ten-second head start before I step back into the club and follow him as he marches straight for the restroom.

The minute he’s inside, he’s fucking *mine*.

I slam a fist into one of his kidneys from behind, then the other, then his ear, making him scream before I kick his knees and send him collapsing to the piss-wet, sticky floor. I lock the door and calmly walk over to him.

He starts to scramble to his feet, but I’m much faster. And despite his size and juiced-up bulk, I sincerely doubt the fucker has ever been in a real fight in his life, aside from throwing drunks out of this place.

Me, though?

I’ve been in *several*.

When I start working him over, I do so methodically, making a deliberate statement. Like an artist or a surgeon. I break his nose first, then his left orbital, then get to work on his mouth, knocking two teeth out.

His abdomen is next, my fists pounding his torso over and over, until even his gym-honed muscles cave and I hear the satisfying snap of ribs. His balls similarly feel the wrath of my shoe, until the top of my foot actually hurts a bit.

He’s done after that, slumped whimpering and bleeding all over the floor, which I’m quite sure is even more piss-wet now.

He mumbles for mercy when I flick out my knife, grab his greasy ponytail in a fist and yank his head back, exposing his neck to the blade.

I’m not going to kill him, though I would *really* like to. But if it’s known that he hit Brooklyn the other night, and then he winds up dead in the men's room of the strip club where she works, she’d be at the top of any semi-competent police detective’s suspect list.

And I know what it feels like to not want the police poking into your life.

I squat beside him, tapping his neck with the tip of my knife a few times before I put it away.

“In case it’s unclear,” I growl quietly, “this is about Brooklyn Ellis.”

His puffy, swelling eyes widen a little bit.

“As in, *Cherry Pie*. There will be no retaliation, got it?” I say icily. “You take this out on her, or anyone else? I’ll know, and I’ll find you, and next time, *I won’t stop*. Nod if you understa—”

“*Fuucck yooou*,” Zak blurts through his bloody mouth.

I punch him as hard as I can between the eyes, smiling when his head bounces off the sticky floor with a crack, knocking him out.

Pissing on his unconscious body isn’t necessary, but *fuck*, it feels good.

Then I slip out of the restroom and walk calmly out the front door.

I'm sure I didn’t get all her monsters tonight.

But it’s a start.

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14

BROOKLYN

THERE'S AN ANXIOUS, nervous feeling hovering in the back of my mind all day. Every second, every minute, every hour brings me a bit closer to the end of the rehearsal day, and a bit closer to my *private* coaching with Kir.

That's the cause of not just the nervous feeling but also a tingle lingering just under my skin, humming like a dark secret in my core.

I tried to snoop out last night just how a Bratva *pakhan* turns out to be a ballet instructor who might even rival Madame Kuzmina. But all I found were press releases and magazine articles about fundraising galas the Zakharova has thrown.

Actually, that's about the only thing I found online about Kir at all. For all intents and purposes, when it comes to a digital footprint, the man is a ghost—if a ghost who occasionally throws lavish, exclusive fundraising galas that are the talk of the high society circles in New York.

I'm chatting with Val and Evie after rehearsal when my phone dings with a text, pulling my attention from Val's story about his brother—*another* criminal kingpin with no social media presence—buying a *plane* or something.

MAYA

holy fuck, are you done with practice yet?! VIP!!

My pulse quickens. VIP is our code for "911, emergency, we need to talk asap".

“Are you okay?!” I blurt when she answers my frantic call.

“*Me*?” She groans. “I'm fine. Shit, didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Maya!” I huff. “You said VIP!!”

“I'm sorry,” she exhales. “But you have to hear this—wait, have you talked to anyone else from the club today?”

“No.”

I’m friendly enough with most of the girls at The Mirage. But Maya’s really the only one there that I talk to outside of work.

She whistles. “*Shit*. Okay… Are you sitting down?”

My brows knit. “Should I be? Can you just get to the point already?”

She laughs. “Okay, get this: last night, someone beat the living *fuck* out of Zak in the men’s room at work.”

My jaw drops. “Seriously?!”

“Yup!” Maya crows. “I mean, fucked his shit *up*. He’s in the hospital with a broken face—like, whoever did it literally *broke his face*. I didn’t know you could *do* that.”

My pulse quickens, and there’s no stopping the grin that creeps over my face.

“Broken nose, some fractured ribs, shattered eye socket, a couple of missing teeth—including one that he half swallowed, which I guess cut up his throat a little bit.” She giggles. “Oh, and you’ll love this last part: he burst a testicle.”

My face scrunches up. “*Fuck*.”

“Right?” She sighs happily. “Honestly, it couldn’t have happened to a nicer shithead. Well, except Lou, I guess. Also…” Her voice drops a little, the excitement leaving her tone.

“What?” I press.

“You know what? Forget it,” she says. “I don’t want to freak you out.”

I frown. “Maya…”

“Just, I was in Lou’s office when he was going over the security tape from last night, trying to see if he could spot whoever fucked Zak up. I’ve been telling him for fucking *ever* that we need more cameras in the place, meanwhile the fucker always jokes about putting the first one in our locker room.” She snorts. “Anyway, there’s like one second on the VIP hallway camera that has any footage of the guy who followed Zak into the men's room, and that's it, and…”

My brow puzzles when she trails off. “*And*…? Just tell me!”

“I… I’m pretty sure it’s the same guy who was looking for you at my place the other day.”

A numb, icy sensation trickles down my spine and wraps an arm around my middle, making me shudder.

“Huh.”

Maya groans. “Fuck, you’re totally freaked out now.”

“No, I'm not!” I lie, forcing a light laugh.

“It was probably someone else,” Maya continues. “Seriously. I mean, it’s like one blurry frame. Anyway.” She changes her tone. “I figured you’d want to hear about Zak.”

I grin. “You figured right. Thanks for telling me.”

I hang up with a shudder.

Woah. I’m not always a big believer in fate. But when Zak gets beaten to a pulp the day after he hits me?

Karma's a bitch, baby.

* * *

I OBVIOUSLY DON'T TELL Val and Evie the real reason I'm staying late tonight. Instead, I mention using the gym downstairs. Val, of course, jokes that I'm just trying to sneak a peek of Kir without his shirt on, same as Evie.

That gets *me* blushing about as red as Evelina.

Even though I'm going to be dancing again, I decide to take a quick shower.

…To rinse off the day, obviously. *Not* because I'm preening for Kir.

I'm *not*.

When I go back to my locker and open it, I freeze.

What the *fuck*?

My skin prickles as I pull out the brand new Hermes quilted duffel bag.

It has *my name* embroidered on the side of it.

I blink quickly, setting it on the bench and tightening the towel around my body as I slowly unzip it.

Holy shit.

It's *filled* with dance stuff: slippers, tights, leotards, rehearsal tutus, leg warmers, little wrap tops…the whole bit. When I look closer, my eyes widen.

It's not cheap stuff, either. It's *all* top-of-the-line brands.

Two Nikolay Grishko warmup sets. A dozen Luckyleo Couture leotards. Three pairs of Repetto's new F.I.T. leather slippers that everyone's been raving about but which are *obviously* beyond my budget. And…oh, God…

My jaw drops when I read the little note hand-written in perfect penmanship on cream-colored card stock:

> "A personalized fitting has been arranged for you at Freed of London with two hundred pairs on order."

My throat tightens. Pointe shoes aren't cheap, and when you dance professionally, you can go through two pairs a week. I mean Naomi blew through three pairs *a night* when she was playing the Odette/Odile role for *Swan Lake*. Freed of London, being that they make gorgeous hand-made shoes, is the absolute other end of the spectrum from "cheap".

Two *hundred* pairs is enough to easily get me through the year. It's also like thirty-fucking-*thousand* dollars worth of shoes, and I'm not quite sure how to actually grasp what I'm looking at.

"You needed an upgrade."

I almost jump out of my skin, whirling at the sound of his voice. My eyes widen, and my hands grip the towel more tightly.

Kir is standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame with his arms folded over his chest.

Most shocking of all, it's the first time I've seen Kir in anything but a suit. He's wearing black gym pants and a fitted black t-shirt.

When I catch my breath enough to speak, I clear my throat and look at the Hermes gym bag, then back at him.

"What is all this?"

"Call it an investment in your future," he growls.

I tense nervously. "Investments usually imply an expected return."

Kir shakes his head. "This is a gift."

"I don't like handouts."

He rolls his eyes. "Fine. You can repay me by showing up *on time* and being ready to work whenever we meet. Is that understood?"

I suck my lower lip between my teeth and glance at the Hermes bag again.

"Your eye is looking better today."

I don't know what it is—a slight note in his tone, or the hint of smugness in his lips? The spark of *knowing* in his gaze, perhaps?

Regardless, I’m connecting dots I didn’t see before.

“Was it you?” I ask quietly.

Kir arches a slightly amused brow. “Be more specific, Ms. Ellis.”

There’s that fucking tone again, and the glint in his eye.

“You went to my home. You asked Maya about me.”

Kir’s face stays totally neutral as he cocks his head to the side, his eyes never leaving mine.

“I went to *someone’s* home, yes.” He eyes me cooly, his jaw tightening. “Who’s your lawyer?”

I bristle. “What were you doing—”

“I asked you a question, Brooklyn.”

God*damn* that infuriatingly authoritative way he speaks to me sometimes—partly because it’s so fucking bossy, and partly because it sounds *way* too good to my ears.

“None of your business,” I snap. Then my eyes narrow. ”Why were you at my apartment?”

“Not *your* apartment,” he tosses back. “I think we can agree on that.”

I swallow. “Someone beat the shit out of a man at my work last night.”

The seconds tick by in silence, Kir’s dark devil eyes trained right on me before he finally answers.

“*Did they now*…”

There’s something incredibly sinister yet frankly *pulse-quickening* about the way he smiles when he says it.

“Yes. They attacked him in the men's room. He had to be hospitalized.”

Kir nods slowly. “Well, perhaps that person has learned a valuable lesson about the consequences of smacking defenseless young women around.”

My whole body stiffens. I shiver as I look at him, my lip catching in my teeth.

"*Thank you*," I finally say quietly.

Kir nods. "Again, your thanks can be made via hard work." He glances at the heavy watch on his wrist. "Be changed and in the studio in three minutes. Bring the new Repettos. You should break them in."

* * *

KIR DOES INDEED SPEND the next hour and a half breaking in the Repettos.

Unluckily for my feet, they're inside the slippers while he does it.

When I finally get a break, whatever "preening" I was doing before our coaching session is a moot point. I'm panting raggedly. Stray strands of blonde are pasted to my forehead and the back of my neck. And I'm *drenched* in sweat.

But I will admit, it feels *good* to be pushed even further than Madame Kuzmina does.

"You got into the final arabesque much better that last time."

I gulp from my water bottle before turning to him and nodding.

"Moving from the *pas de bourrée*—"

"Into the *ballonnés*, yes," Kir agrees. "That's the way to attack the arabesque at that point. You did well there."

I feel my chest swell with pride as my face heats a little.

"Thanks," I say quietly.

He looks at me impassively. "What I want you to remember, though, is never to back off. Don't second guess yourself, don't hesitate. There is *zero* room for that at this level, Brooklyn."

I nod. "Got it."

He shakes his head. “No. Don’t just *get* it. *Feel* it. Inject it into your veins—”

“Yeah, *I got it*,” I mutter, sucking in another gulp of air before following it with more water.

Kir cocks a stern, reproachful eyebrow at me. Holy *wow*, it’s a physical manifestation of that authoritative tone he gets sometimes.

The problem is, same as the vocal tone, if it’ meant to intimidate me, it’s not really working. It’s just…*thrilling*.

“I will inject it into my veins,” I say solemnly, grinning a little.

He sighs, giving me a half-smile.

“How do you know so much about ballet?”

Kir frowns. “We covered this.”

“No, you artfully dodged it the last time I asked. And don’t tell me it’s because you own a ballet company. Your knowledge is *way* above that, and you know it.”

An almost imperceptible smile tugs the corners of his lips for a second.

“I…may have danced when I was younger.”

My brows fly up. “Wait, what? *Ballet*?”

He nods. “All the boys did at the boarding school I attended. Ballet, boxing, gymnastics. Welcome to newly post-Soviet Russia,” he says dryly.

“You *really* know your shit.” I wince. “Sorry,” I mumble. “Language, I know.”

He smirks. “I kept dancing when I attended Oxford.”

“That where you got your James Bond accent?”

Kir’s lips curl at the corners. “I learned quickly that in the circles I wished to move through, and eventually do business with, *ze thick Russian accent makes you zound like Bond villain*.”

His comically over-the-top accent instantly makes me giggle like an idiot before I catch myself and stop.

Kir shrugs. “I also noticed that when I spoke like the rest of them, doors opened. Opportunities that I had no business getting came my way. I suppose after a while, this way of speaking became my new normal.”

“Well, it’s not a *bad* accent,” I grin. “I bet it doesn’t hurt with women, either.”

Fucking HELL, self. Really?

I wince, feeling my face burn.

“I mean…not that…” I stammer. “I didn’t mean it’s a sexy accent, or…”

Good evening, foot. Allow me to introduce you to mouth. Jesus.

Kir lifts an amused brow as I trail off, shaking my head.

“Let’s take it from the top again,” he says brusquely, already moving past it. “Get into position. I’m going to go find some water.”

“Oh, here, take mine.”

I stand and abruptly throw my water bottle at Kir with zero heads-up. Luckily, moving with reflexes that shock me, he actually *does* catch it with one hand before it slams into his face.

Not-so-luckily, I apparently didn’t have the top screwed on properly.

Kir grunts as all the water inside that was inside the bottle crashes into his chest, soaking his shirt as my hands fly to my mouth in horror.

“I am *so* sorry!” I shriek. “Oh my God, I’m—”

“It’s fine, Brooklyn,” he murmurs. “It’s just water.”

“Seriously, I had no idea it was unscrewed like that! Let me—”

“I said it’s *fine*,” he mutters, looking right at me. He walks over to the iPad and the sound system before turning back to me. “From the top, and do *not* let me see you hesitate. Go.”

The music begins to swell through the speakers, and I launch into it. I move with practiced but not stiff movements. I actually shut off the second-guesser inside me. I don't think, I just dance.

Or at least, I do until I catch a glimpse out of the corner of my eye of Kir *pulling off his shirt* and tossing it aside.

It totally shatters my concentration. Which, obviously, never works out well.

"Stop," he snaps, shutting the music down.

"Sorry," I mumble, not looking at him. I *can't* right now. "I didn't center properly before we started."

"Well, do it now."

I nod, but when I turn to get into position my gaze lands squarely on him, and *holy shit*, there's no stopping my eyes from bulging out of my head.

Fuck, is he hot.

Standing there in black gym pants and no shirt, Kir looks like a fucking *god*. Or more accurately, a devil dripping in sin and temptation.

Broad, sculpted shoulders. Thickly muscled biceps and veined forearms. A chest carved from wood, a chiseled six-pack, and he's even got those sexy grooves going down his hips and plunging into the waistband of his gym pants.

And the man is *forty-fucking-four* years old.

My brain screams at me to stop staring at him like a fucking creep. But I *can't*, especially once my eyes lock onto the huge, ornate Russian orthodox cross tattooed across his chest, plus an eight-pointed star just under his neckline.

As if I needed a reminder that my current ballet instructor also happens to be the leader of one of the biggest Bratva families in the world.

"Ms. Ellis."

His cool, even tone rips my attention from his chest to his piercing, dark eyes.

“Surely when you’ve been dancing as long as you have you don't get surprised by a human body.”

My face turns to fire as I shake my head. “Not at all,” I croak, forcing a smile.

“Then let’s begin.”

This time, when I begin to dance, he’s right there beside me with each movement, his words both cracking like a whip but also lifting me up.

“Turn your head!” he barks. “Arch your back more. *More*, Ms. Ellis!”

Sweat trickles down my temples and slips down my spine. My muscles scream, begging for relief.

Each lash of his words feels less like punishment and more like freedom. Each shouted reminder to do this or that is like an extra pair of hands lifting me, urging me on as I let go completely and give myself over to the movement.

“Arms up. *More*, Brooklyn.”

My pulse jumps when I feel him move into step behind me, like he fucking knows this choreography as well as I do. His hands skim up my arms, grasping my elbows and lifting my hands above my head as his body presses to mine, his muscled chest against the skin of my back where the leotard plunges low.

We move in unison, leaping as one. His hands skim down my arms, gripping my waist tightly as he pushes me to arch my back further. He moves with me, his hands sliding over my hips to clasp my middle as we sink into the backbend.

Heat ignites in my core and pools between my thighs. I can feel a tightness in my nipples, aching against the silky fabric of the leotard. Kir’s grip tightens on my hips again, his thumbs at the small of my back and his large,

thick fingers splayed across my lower belly. His touch has my head spinning and my pulse roaring.

I'm sweating. So is he. I can feel his muscles twitching against my back and my ass. His pulse throbbing. His breath, hot in my ear and lingering teasingly against my neck as he growls each authoritative command.

The music swells to a crescendo, our hips glued together, his hands squeezing my body as my blood rages like fire in my veins and my body aches for him to throw me to the ground and take me any way he wants.

Then the music slows, and stops.

We come to a standstill, but Kir doesn't let go. He's still holding me tightly from behind, his fingers spread across my stomach, his hands gripping my waist. His chest is still pressed to my back, and when I feel the thick, hard, pulsing of his cock against my ass, my breath catches and my thighs squeeze together.

"*Good girl*."

My entire body shudders, my eyes half closing and rolling up as he breathes the words in my ear.

"That was *very* good, Ms. Ellis."

Slowly, I turn in his grip, until I'm facing him, looking up into his eyes with his hands tight around my waist.

I can still feel his erection—hard, shockingly large, bulging against my stomach.

Our eyes lock, our mouths mere inches apart, breathing each other's air as our chests rise and fall with exertion.

My gaze moves to his full, gorgeous lips. Then back to his eyes. Then down to his lips again as my pulse skips and heat slithers and coils in my core.

"I—"

"Excellent work, Ms. Ellis."

With no warning, the shock of him suddenly letting go, stepping back, and whirling to walk briskly across the room feels like a punch to the chest. I flinch, drawing in a breath, as if his nearness just now sucked the oxygen from the room.

“Now,” he barks coldly as he steps over to the iPad, his back to me. “Again. From the top. *Without* my help this time.”

I feel dizzy, like my head isn’t screwed on right. My legs don’t want to work. I want to be back where I was ten seconds ago, in Kir's arms, looking up into his eyes, breathing him in and feeling the throb of his desire for me against my body.

Kir turns, his brow furrowed, his eyes black as they stab across the room.

“I said *again*, Ms. Ellis,” he growls.

Swallowing quickly, I nod. “Y-yeah,” I mumble. “Okay.”

The music starts again, and I do too.

But it’s not the same.

I’m not sure it ever will be.

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15

BROOKLYN

FOR ONE BRIEF MOMENT, it felt like I was dancing in the stratosphere.

The rest of the world stopped mattering, the Earth stopped turning, and time itself seemed to stand still when Kir's hands were on my waist and those dark devil eyes were piercing into my very soul.

But ever since that moment shattered, the universe has been speeding to catch up—even though it's pretty clear that moment is *never* coming back.

It was obvious enough when he abruptly walked away and acted like nothing had happened. But Kir has spent the last two weeks of our private sessions being an absolute fucking *dickhead* to me, just in case I needed it to be even clearer.

Spoiler: I didn't.

The one good thing about the last two weeks has been Lou pretty much sealing himself in his office and barely coming out. Lou might manage The Mirage and be the owner on paper, but it actually belongs to a Russian mobster who—according to Maya—uses it to launder money since it's such a cash-heavy business.

Anyway, Zak getting the shit kicked out of him in the men's room has resulted in the police coming by to sniff around a few times, and Lou's boss isn't so happy about it. Plus, Lou himself does business with a bunch of super shady guys, and his head bouncer getting half beaten to death has him extra paranoid.

So, work might be a little easier…relatively speaking. But my after-hours sessions with Kir have become much, much harder, between the grueling repetition and Kir's razor-sharp critiques.

He's a monster of a coach: brutal, unencumbered by niceties, and uncaring of things like physical human limits. He just keeps *pushing*.

But loath as I am to admit it…I *am* getting better. Noticeably so. Even Madame Kuzmina made a comment about it earlier today, which feels damn good.

Doesn't mean Kir isn't still a giant dick.

"Uh… What are those?"

Clad in form-fitting black gym pants and a black t-shirt that clings to every single muscled groove on his torso and arms, Kir stands in the studio doorway.

He's holding two pairs of boxing gloves.

I swallow, feeling the now-familiar twist of excitement and caged wariness that slides through me whenever we're in the same room. Kir walks over to where I've been stretching on the barre. I fidget, tugging at my dance shorts and readjusting the straps of my tank top.

"Put them on."

I stare at the gloves, then at him.

"I'm sorry?"

"We're doing something different tonight. Put them on."

He pushes them into my hands, then starts pulling on his own. I watch him use his teeth to tighten the Velcro on the second glove, my pulse quickening with nerves and anxiety as I mimic his technique.

Milena and I took a self-defense course a year or so ago on a whim. But that's the extent of my combat experience. So when Kir ushers me to the center of the studio and raises his fists in a *very* practiced way, my insides knot.

“I… I don’t know how to box.”

“This isn’t about boxing,” Kir says. “It's about conquering fear. Hands up.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to do this.”

“Too bad.”

With *zero* warning, he surges right into my personal space, throwing a wild punch. I shriek, my heart hammering in my chest as I jump away from him.

“What the *fuck*?!”

Kir eyes me. “You’re scared when you dance. We’re addressing that today.”

I stare. “I’m *scared* when a man twice my fucking size throws a punch—”

“Language, Brooklyn.”

I bristle. But…*fuck*. It’s *hot* the way he says my name. Like a warning. Like a stern authority figure.

“I said I didn’t want to do this,” I hiss.

Kir lifts a muscled shoulder. “And I said *too bad*. This is what we’re doing today. You can either put your hands up and learn how to deflect, or you can get knocked down.”

He lifts his gloves, his dark eyes burning into mine.

“I’m going to come at you now. What I need *you* to do is not be afraid.”

I bark a laugh. “I won’t be, when you remember that this is fucking *ballet*—”

“Language—”

“Yeah, *got it*,” I snap. “But this is ballet, not hand-to-hand combat.”

Kir shakes his head. “I’ve already told you. Ballet is war. It is merciless, and unforgiving, and it’s never going to wait for you to *be ready*.”

He steps closer to me, invading my personal space. The heat of his body and his heady, masculine scent—clean, mixed with citrus and a hint of pine

—sends my system spiraling.

“You’re a *very* good dancer,” he murmurs.

My face burns as my teeth sink into my bottom lip. “Thank you—”

“I wasn’t finished.” He fixes me with a look. “*Lots* of dancers are very good, Brooklyn. What’s holding you back from actual greatness is fear. I *will* be removing that from you, one way or another.”

My brow furrows. “I’m not scared—”

“Maybe not of dancing itself, or of me,” he continues. “But of *something*. It dogs your steps, making you hesitate when there needs to be immediate action.”

My lips purse. I want to chalk this up to him being a tyrant on a power trip.

But…part of me deep inside knows this isn’t Kir trying to insult me, or “neg” me, or anything.

It's the truth.

It's harsh, hurtful, and ego-bruising…but it *is* the truth.

I *do* hesitate. I know that. There are moments where I pause where there needs to be unflinching, unthinking, immediate action. I used to have that. At least, I think I did. But wherever it went, it hasn’t come out in a long, long time.

“Gloves up,” Kir says sternly. “And then hit me.”

I swallow, lifting my fists, my pulse thudding heavily in my ears. My muscles coil, my teeth clamp down on my lower lip, and I look him right in the eye, over our raised fists.

For a second, I wonder if this is some sick punishment for me kissing him the other week. It's possible. I think he could be a sadist like that. But there’s no time to dwell on it now.

“Hit me, Brooklyn,” he growls. “If you can. You might be too scared.” He shrugs. “I forget sometimes that you’re just a scared, weak little girl.”

My eyes pull to slits as he looks at me, unblinking.

“I know what you’re doing.”

He lifts a brow. “Oh? What might that be?”

“Goading me.”

“Maybe.”

“You want me to hit you and play this stupid fucking game.”

“Language. I won’t say it again,” he hisses icily. “*Yes*, I want you to hit me. And yes, you *will* be playing this game.”

I bristle, trying to ignore the throb inside me when he said “language” in that disturbingly hot authoritative way of his.

“And if I refuse?”

Kir looks right at me. “Then I’ll know that this whole show about you wanting to get into the *Imperiya Korona* is just a front, and that, like I assumed, you’re actually just a scared, weak…” His eyes glint. “*Poor* young woman living a life of regret and missed opportunities.”

Viciousness snarls and stretches awake inside me.

“That was uncalled for,” I spit.

He shrugs. “Do something about it.”

My teeth grind. “I don’t want to, okay?! I don’t want to hit you, I don’t want to play these mind games. You’re just trying to be an asshole—”

“Not playing the game doesn’t mean you don’t lose, Brooklyn,” he snaps, stepping closer.

My breath catches as he puts his gloved hands behind his back and leans down, his lips brushing my cheek in a way that sends my heart rate soaring. His breath, scent, and heat tease against the sensitive skin of my neck, making me tremble in spite of myself.

“I’ve read your file, Ms. Ellis,” he whispers quietly. “No parents. In and out of foster care. A product of *the system*. A *failure,* some might say.”

Anger flares in my veins.

“*Screw*—”

“A girl with no money, coming here every day and trying to pretend that she fits in with all the other girls—like Milena, the daughter of a Bratva *pakhan*. Or Lyra, married to an Italian don. Or Evelina, born a privileged princess.” He sighs. “And you, Brooklyn, come here every day with a chip on your shoulder and pointe shoes that need replacing. With thrifted clothes and ambitions you know deep down you'll never realize, given the circumstances into which you were born.”

I know what he’s doing. It doesn’t mean I’m not shaking with fury and blinking back hot tears as I grit my teeth.

“You don’t know *shit* about me.”

“*Language*. I know everything about you,” he snarls. “You’re no mystery, Brooklyn. You think I don’t see how you look at your friends? See the jealousy you loathe having? You *know* you’re not really like them, and never will be. You think I don’t see the jaded desperation, a poor artist spending her evenings serving drinks to men and flaunting her body to get better tips?”

“*Fuck. You,*” I choke, a tear trickling down my cheek. “And fuck this, I’m done—”

“Why don’t you just get up on the pole next time you’re at work? Then maybe you'll finally get the scraps of attention and love you’re so desperate for—”

Kir's words cut off with a grunt when I wind up and slam my gloved fist into the side of his jaw with a satisfying *thunk*.

Instantly, the whole studio goes silent. My eyes widen, my gloved hands flying to my face and pure, unadulterated horror dripping through me like ice water.

“*Oh God*,” I choke, backing away from him, my chest rising and falling. “*I am SO* sorry—”

I scream when he surges into me, his gloved hands plowing into my shoulders and shoving me stumbling backward. I barely catch my balance to avoid falling, then whirl to stare at him in utter confusion.

“I—!”

“Never show weakness,” Kir growls. “Accept your wins. *Take* them. Don’t apologize for them,” he barks.

“I don’t want to hit you!” I yell. “I don’t want to fight!”

“*Then give up*!” he roars. “Go take your goddamn clothes off for money and accept that life is always going to be hard, and the deck will always be stacked against you. If you give up,” he hisses, “then *that’s* your pathetic little life.” He glares at me. “That what you want, Brooklyn? To be pathetic?”

“*Fuck you*,” I spit. “You power-hungry egotistical fucking psycho—”

“*Language*!!” he bellows.

It happens as suddenly as a crack of lightning. Without thinking about the repercussions, I launch myself at him with a terrifying battle cry on my lips that I don’t even recognize. My gloved fist slams into the side of his jaw again, knocking his head to the side. I punch him as hard as I can in the stomach, and then again in his chest.

“*FUCK! YOU!*” I scream, punching him over and over, my fists and arms whirling madly as my vision turns black and red.

I wince when his glove smacks the side of my head. But I dig deep, snarling with fury I didn’t know I possessed as I hurl myself at him again.

Our limbs tangle. Gloves smack against muscle. Our choked, snarled gasps and muttered curses mix with heavy, panted breaths. Skin rubs against skin. My hair spills across my face as the world goes sideways and I find myself being tackled to the ground, still fighting him as we land in a panting, heaving heap.

It’s not until our eyes lock that everything goes still, the black and red mist clears from my eyes, and I’m suddenly hyper aware of three things.

One, I’m on my back on the floor. Two, Kir is between my legs, which are wrapped around his hips. His muscled arms are on either side of my head, his gloved fists balancing him right over me, his face inches from mine.

And three?

I can feel Kir’s *thick*, large erection twitching against my pussy through his gym pants and my thin dance shorts, in a way that has my pulse roaring and my core tingling and aching with need.

Something inside me flickers and ignites as the full reality of the situation throbs quite literally against me.

The room is silent except for the labored sound of our breathing. My pulse races madly, my skin slick with sweat and tingling with inescapable heat. Kir’s eyes are alive with black fire, lancing right into mine as his arm muscles flex.

Time stands still as I feel his hips subtly grind against me, his huge erection rubbing against my pussy.

I’m wet.

Horribly, achingly, disastrously so.

His arms lower slightly, and my breath catches as my eyes dart between his eyes and his sinfully perfect lips.

He lowers himself even more until his mouth is barely two inches from mine, the sweet heat of his breath teasing over my lips as our chests rise and fall.

Do it, I scream inside. *Close the distance. Kiss me until it’s all I know. Just fucking do it. Please*.

“*Kir—*”

I startle when he suddenly flinches. Abruptly, like a switch being thrown, he’s pushing himself off me, scrambling to his feet, and whirling away.

I lie there stunned on the floor for a second before a mortifying feeling crashes through me, forcing me to my feet. I turn away, hugging myself, trying to catch my breath and slow my racing heart.

But then, realization floods my skin and sinks into my veins.

That's the second time this has happened: a too-real momentary flash of intimacy that we're *both* clearly being drawn into. But then *he* pulls back, and grows cold, and acts like it was all *me*.

I'm tired of being made to think that I'm the only one who keeps feeling this.

"So was that pushing me to be stronger?" I snap, turning to him and yanking my gloves off. "Or punishing me for daring to question you?"

He stiffens, half-turning his head to glance at me.

"Or was it just you losing control?"

He turns a little more, his eyes flashing as he levels a cold look at me.

"I don't lose control, Ms. Ellis."

I bark a laugh. "Right, because that was obviously you in *complete* control when you tackled a girl half your age to the ground and dry-humped her—"

"That's *enough*, Brooklyn," he snarls.

"Is this why you like ballet?" I toss at him. "All those young girls, prancing around in leotards and tights?"

Kir turns to face me fully, standing rigid and tall, his eyes smoldering.

Fuck, is he gorgeous, in a dark, terrifying way.

"You're treading on *very* thin ice, Ms. Ellis," he rasps. "I would suggest *stopping*."

"Is that it, Kir?" I hurl back. "You just want to be able to walk in here and single out some poor, struggling girl to play fucking head games with?"

His eyes turn the color of midnight.

“That what does it for you?” I snap. “That what gets you—”

“Stop.”

He doesn’t yell it. Honestly, he barely raises his voice. But the sheer power behind that single word, the dark, vicious way it curls its tendrils around me, instantly gets my attention, sharp and focused.

It feels like the entire balance of power has completely skewed in his favor. Just *one fucking word* coming from those sinful lips, and whatever cockiness and sass I was feeling dissipates like smoke. Suddenly, I realize I’m standing in the lion’s den, taunting the king of the jungle himself.

Kir pulls off his boxing gloves deliberately, setting them aside before he folds his hands behind his back. He levels a withering, authoritative look at me that makes my core clench and my legs tremble.

He draws in a slow, deep breath, then exhales and looks right at me.

“Come here.”

Heat slithers down my spine.

“I—”

“I didn’t tell you to speak,” he replies. “I told you to *come. Here*.”

He brings a hand out from behind his back and points to the floor directly in front of him.

“*Now*, Ms. Ellis.”

My pulse quickens as Kir takes a step back and sits on the long bench behind him, where dancers usually rest before or after rehearsal to gab or catch a breath.

I shiver as Kir plants his palms on his slightly spread thighs, his dark eyes piercing into mine across the low-lit room.

“Come. *Here*.”

He punctuates each word with another point of his finger to the floor.

And suddenly, like I’m being pulled by invisible strings, I'm walking over.

I stop right in front of him, my pulse racing. I clasp my hands in front of me, then nervously slide them up the opposite arms, until I’m hugging my body. My teeth sink into my bottom lip as Kir looks into my eyes.

“It was my hope that the rigorous nature of our rehearsals would stamp out your *bratty* attitude,” he murmurs darkly. “But it would appear I was incorrect.”

Without blinking, without missing a beat, he jabs his pointer finger down on his muscular thigh.

“Bend over.”

It’s like I’ve been physically shocked. I flinch, an arresting sensation coiling inside me and yanking my psyche to a dark, electrifying place.

My mouth falls open, but no sound tumbles out. My eyes go wide, scandalized, even as my core tightens with need, my thighs clench and my nipples ache against my top.

“I…” My voice is barely above a whisper. “*What*?”

“Did I stutter, Ms. Ellis,” Kir murmurs.

I shiver, shaking my head. “N-no.”

“No *what*.”

Oh, fuck.

I don’t even have to say it out loud to feel the needy ache inside me.

“No, *sir*,” I choke quietly.

“Then get the fuck over my knee, *now*.”

I move in a daze, my entire body throbbing. My pulse races and my skin tingles as I step closer. His scent washes over me as I move to his side, turn toward his lap, and take a shaky breath.

Then, I do it.

My entire reality blurs as I bend forward, leaning over his thighs and lowering my abdomen to them.

It's not until I'm lying across his lap that I realize my knees won't touch the ground. My toes tense against the floor as heat floods my face at the awkward way I'm positioned, pushing my ass up in the air.

"In this studio, when I give you a direction, Ms. Ellis," he rumbles, "you will *follow* it. Is that clear?"

"*Yes, sir*," I choke, my breath strangled, my throat tightening, my entire body tingling with heat.

My eyes bulge as I feel him roughly grip the waistband of my dance shorts at the back and abruptly yank them down, peeling them off my ass and letting them tangle at mid-thigh.

Heat explodes though my face.

The shorts have built-in panties, which means I'm now completely bare-assed, butt up in the air, with *all of me* clearly on display.

Before I can say or do anything, I feel his firm palm rest against the soft skin of my butt.

I want to say I don't know what the fuck is going on. But I do.

I know *exactly* what's about to happen, and it's making my pulse *thunder*, my body ache and throb, and the wet heat between my thighs so blatantly obvious that I swear I can feel it trickling down and seeping into the gym pants stretched over his muscled thighs.

"There will be ten, Brooklyn," Kir murmurs. His voice isn't raised at all: it almost sounds comforting. Nurturing. "You'll count each one out loud. If you make a mistake, we'll start over, and that will continue until you manage to get it right." His open palm strokes my ass, making my core clench with need and anticipation.

"Is that clear?"

I nod, shivering as my hair tumbles across my face.

“*Is that clear, Brooklyn*.”

A low whine wrenches from my threat. “*Yes, sir*,” I choke.

“Good girl.”

The only warning is that his warm palm leaves my ass. Then it comes back with a sudden, vicious *SMACK* that echoes through the room and makes me yelp.

“*One*!” I choke, squirming in his lap as his palm spanks my bare ass, *hard*.

The hand comes down again, brutally hitting other cheek.

“*TWO*!” I blurt, my voice wavering.

He alternates between my cheeks for number three and four. I get them right.

I fuck up on the next one, though. The sensation of his palm smacking my skin and sending raw heat spiraling out from the point of impact is turning my brain to goo and making my body writhe and grind shamelessly against his thigh.

“That was five,” Kir murmurs darkly after a few seconds of silence.

I shudder, suddenly horrifically aware of what I’ve done.

“*Fi—*”

“Too late.”

I squeal as his palm crashes into my ass again.

“That’s one again,” he murmurs. “Try to keep track, Ms. Ellis.”

“*One*!” I repeat, my voice whiny, eager, floaty.

He keeps going, alternating between my cheeks, each lash of his hand getting harder and harder until my entire ass is on fire in the most delicious way possible.

“*Nine*!” I squeal. My voice is totally transformed. So is my headspace. It feels like I’m melting, sinking down into soft, consuming darkness. Like

reality is swallowing me up and cocooning me in a weirdly relaxed, euphoric embrace.

I feel utter detachment from myself, like an out-of-body experience. I watch from somewhere else as this gorgeous, all-consuming man bends me over his knee and *spanks me* until he fucking owns me.

"*Ten…*"

I barely get the word out as the last blow crashes to my bruised, tender flesh.

His hand lingers there, gently stroking my throbbing ass, his fingers dancing from one cheek to the other—tracing, calming, soothing as I sink deeper and deeper into the glow of submission.

His hand slips between my thighs. I'm still in that melty place in my head, and when I feel his fingers slide over my *soaked* pussy, I whimper and spread my legs a little wider.

"*Good girl*."

As he says it, he sinks two fingers into me.

Oh, fuck.

He curls them deep, stroking the pads of his thick fingers against my g-spot. He adds more pressure, stoking and teasing and pumping his fingers in and out of my pussy.

All I can do is melt against his legs and drip all over him. My eyes roll back. My mouth goes slack. My thighs tremble against his and my body writhes and undulates, taking his fingers over and over until everything starts to blur.

"Such a good girl, Brooklyn," he growls quietly, pushing his fingers into me and gathering my ponytail in his fist. "You're making a mess of my fingers, baby girl," he rasps. "You want to come all over them, don't you."

I whimper, my entire reality blurring and melting around me as I nod my head.

“I asked you a question, Brooklyn.”

“*Yes*!” I whine, my whole body beginning to seize up. “*Yes, sir*!”

“Then be a good girl,” he murmurs, tugging my hair and ramming his fingers into my pussy, filling the practice studio with lewd, wet sounds. “*Come for me*.”

Jesus…

It hits me like a bomb detonating. I choke, my back arching as my core *explodes* with the violent carnage of my release. The orgasm twists and rampages though me, curling my toes and wringing my whole body out as I scream and come hard against his fingers.

I lie there panting and shaking on his thighs as Kir slowly strokes his fingers in and out of my quivering, spasming pussy, before slowly he draws them out.

“Stand up.”

I’m still shaking all over, my legs barely working and my grip on reality only very loose. I hold his thigh unsteadily, pushing myself up until I’m standing again.

My face is crimson. My whole body is still throbbing and clenching. Slick wetness coats my thighs as I reach down to pull my shorts back up.

“Next time, Ms. Ellis,” Kir purrs quietly as he stands up to loom over me. He reaches out, cupping my jaw with his hand and lifting my gaze to his. “Leave the attitude at the door. You will do what I say, when and how I say to do it. If you don’t, you will be punished again. Do you understand?”

I nod quickly, lowering my eyes as heat throbs inside me.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good girl.”

Fuck. Me.

Slowly, Kir brings his hand—the one that spanked me and brought me to orgasm all over his fingers—up to his mouth. My eyes widen as he captures

them with his, never blinking, never looking away as he wraps his lips around his fingers and *sucks*.

My mouth is still hanging open as he slowly slips his wet fingers from his lips.

“You may go now, Ms. Ellis.”

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16

KIR

UNDERSTATEMENT OF THE FUCKING CENTURY: I've crossed a major, serious line when it comes to Brooklyn.

Doing what I did that night when I saw those four motherfuckers trying to rape her was one thing. Of *course* I stopped it. What I do for a living notwithstanding, I'm not a psychopath.

I saw a young woman who needed help, and I stepped in.

Taking her home was the logical extension of that help, when it became clear she needed medical attention but didn't want the authorities involved. That I could understand.

It's everything *after* that which becomes…a gray area.

Maybe I could lie to myself and say that I've been coaching her because even though I know there's no spot for her in *Imperiya Korona*—because it's earmarked for Inessa Moskovic—*maybe* if she achieves perfection, Ivan will find room for her, thus realizing her dream.

I could also say my interest in her—looking into where she lives, works, her financial situation— extends past dance and comes from a place of me wanting to be a Good Samaritan.

But there's nothing noble about my growing obsession with Brooklyn.

…I think what happened the other night is a pretty clear indicator of that.

It's not that I merely want to help her. I want to know more about her. I see a sadness in her that makes me want to lift her out of her situation, whatever it may be, and surround her in safety and comfort. I want to wash the grime from under her nails and drape her in finery.

But also, I want to fuck her on silk sheets with her tight cunt strangling my cock.

Shit.

I'm practically twice her age. This should have stopped long before I took her over my fucking knee the other night and spanked her ass raw. Before I sank my fingers into her molten pussy and fingered her until she came all over my hand.

…Which I then licked off.

After Brooklyn left that night, I went right to the men's room and stroked my cock, tasting her sweetness on my fingers until my cum exploded into the toilet.

Then I went home and did it all again.

This is a problem on several levels.

With a scowl, I rise from my desk and cross the office to the bar cart by the window. I pour myself a whiskey, put on Nirvana's *In Utero*, and then glance out the huge old window at the grounds and the Manhattan skyline beyond.

This house—a vast, elegant thing built by the Vanderbilts—was one of my first "extravagant" purchases when I ascended to the level of power I hold today. I also keep a much more modern penthouse in Midtown, overlooking Central Park, but it's here that I enjoy spending most of my time.

Not in the thick of things, but just outside the madness, with a view of it all.

I pick up the old photograph of my father on the bar cart, thinking how different it all used to be. My father's organization was worlds away from the empire I helm today. Back then, in Moscow, we were one of a hundred little fiefdoms all fighting for scraps after the fall of the Soviet Union. The

Moskovic Bratva, which was run at the time by Dimitri's father, was another.

But that was before some of the stronger families consolidated power, looked down their noses at the hordes of small, would-be empires, and tried to snuff us all out at once.

One night, the authorities, on the payroll of a larger family, raided our home and dragged my whole family into the streets.

My mother was shot and killed when she tried to come to the aid of my crying sister, Polina, and bolted away from the men holding her down. Her brother—my uncle—was shot next when he fought back.

I wanted to fight, too. I wanted take as many of them with me as I could when I died.

But my father forcibly stopped me. He told me my time would come, but it would not be that night.

After that, my father went to work for the Vitevsky Bratva—one of the larger families that rose to dominate Moscow after the fall of the Soviet Union. He gave them his money, his contacts, his connections, his routes… everything.

And me? At the age of eight, I was sent to Zavolzhsky Penal Camp Eighteen, in Siberia.

For six long years.

I *hated* my father for it. I spent ages thinking he'd sold me out, that he'd allowed his son to rot in hell while he served the men who destroyed our family.

It wasn't until much later that I realized what he'd done for me.

He traded all of it—his businesses, his money, his power, even his freedom—to keep me alive. Yes, I was in hell on earth. But I wasn't shot in the streets or thrown in a Moscow prison to be gutted in the showers.

It can't have been an easy choice. But it was the only one he had.

He was dead by the time I got out of Zavolzhsky, but he'd used the last of his money and connections to get me out of Moscow, away from the Vitevsky Bratva, and to a boarding school near Volgograd.

That's what led me to Oxford. And it's the connections I made there, together with the power I slowly and carefully built, that eventually got me back to Russia.

That was the lesson my father left me with when he grabbed me that horrible night and stopped me from trying to fight a platoon of armed police.

Don't react impetuously. Wait. Plan. And then, when your enemies least expect it, strike with the force of thunder and erase them from history.

That's what I did when I returned to Moscow. Through a series of faked emails, manipulations, bribes, and determination, I arranged for the entire upper echelon of the Vitevsky Bratva to meet for a sit-down at Pyotr Vitevsky's mansion.

Pyotr himself, both his sons, all his *avtoritets* and under-captains, his advisors, and the heads of his security wings were there. Also present were four corrupt police captains and three national ministers.

I had every window welded shut. Every door locked and chained.

Then I burned the place to the ground.

I don't think anyone in the Bratva world will soon forget the night of the "Ashen Purge," as it's become called.

So needless to say, there's a reason I don't have many people close to me in my life. Trust is part of it, but I also simply don't *have* much family.

Polina, my sister, was saved that night because my father got her to publicly disown our family. She went to live with the family of one of her classmates and eventually married a good man.

They're both dead now. But her son, my nephew Damian, is very much part of my life. For a while, it seemed like he'd be taking over the Nikolayev empire one day, but he recently married Hana Mori, sister of Kenzo Mori,

the leader of the Mori-kai Yakuza. He's still involved with the Nikolayev organization, of course. But his life is in Japan now, with Hana and the family they're starting soon.

Then there's my half-nephew here in New York. We're close enough, but for various reasons—me the *pakhan* of a Bratva family, him the don of an Italian one—we've decided to keep our relationship quiet. It's just…easier.

And then there's Freya, the daughter I didn't even know about until recently, who's also married into the Mori-kai family now. Her mother and I only knew each other briefly, when we were barely eighteen. It was a lifetime ago, and ultimately never something I think either of us wanted… and she, too, is long dead.

I take another sip of whisky, setting the photograph down with a sigh.

Needless to say, it would be pretty easy for a shrink to figure out why I stay away from personal relationships.

I have what I need: my nephews, the daughter I've reconnected with. Isaak, in a way, but that's it.

There's been the occasional woman over the years, of course. But I've never pursued anything beyond a single night with any of them. When you let people in, they get leverage. Or else they become weaknesses. Vulnerabilities.

I've built everything I have on control and discipline. And Brooklyn Ellis is the *exact* kind of complication that takes that control and upends it.

Whatever fucked-up part of me wants to protect her, to save her from her demons, it needs to be cut the fuck *out*.

I finish the last of my drink, eyes fixed on the city beyond the window again.

Enough.

This thing with Brooklyn ends, here and now.

For her sake, if nothing else.

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17

BROOKLYN

OVER THE LAST FEW WEEKS, I've run the gamut of different emotions as the rehearsal day draws to close, knowing what comes next.

Namely, Kir, and our private lessons.

Nervousness. Apprehension. Fear. Giddiness. Excitement. The urge to rise to his challenges, and the equally strong urge to dump something foul over his head to evoke *some* kind of emotion other than his strict, at times overbearing authoritarianism. Something to mess up his perfect, gorgeous exterior.

Other times, yes, it's been a mashup of schoolgirl crush and outright desire.

I mean the man is fucking *beautiful*, with a sinful body and eyes that turn me into a puddle.

But the sensation simmering inside me today as our meeting time approaches is new. It churns inside me like burning fuel, filled with hungry, yearning need.

And it's all down to the fact that last night, things went to a new level, when he bent me over his knees, pulled my shorts down, and *spanked me*.

Touched me, and rammed his thick fingers into me, making me feel something I've never felt before.

I mean that quite literally.

I'm pretty sure I've come before. Sort of. But only with myself, and only in a way that feels like the "big O" that everyone raves about has been *way* overhyped. I mean it feels *good*, I guess, when I rub my clit or grind a pillow between my legs. It's like a sneeze, but more. It makes me smile after for about five seconds before it just sort of…goes away.

That *cannot* be what everyone always gushes about like it's the most amazing thing on Earth. But there's never been anything I could do about it. What I feel with my fingers or a pillow is as much as I can coax out of myself.

This has, unsurprisingly, led to not much in the way of experiences with other people. I'm sure the various traumas I endured in the foster system didn't exactly help, but the fact that I've never had "that" kind of mind-blowing orgasm has prevented me from really trying with anyone else.

And then all that changed last night, when Kir put me over his knee, spanked me, and tore something out of me unlike anything I've experienced before.

An orgasm.

A real, actual, "holy-what-the-*fuck*" orgasm.

I've been fucking *buzzing* ever since.

I tried to recreate the feeling when I got back to Pearl last night. It's not like the back seat of an Accord parked on a random side street in Little Italy is the ideal setting for some self-love. But I was still feeling the aftershocks of his fingers in me, and I *needed* more of the delicious sensation.

I couldn't quite get there, but it was better than most other times I've tried.

Val even called me out on my elevated mood today, which terrified me because he's a fucking bloodhound when it comes to anything sexual. Mercifully, I managed to dodge his questions until Madame Kuzmina's grueling rehearsal started.

But now that's over, and I find myself showering before meeting with Kir, and that same sensation spreads through me like a drug. My body tingles

under the shower spray, every drop of water and drip of soap like his touch, teasing over my skin.

I run my hands over my body, feeling a warm ache when I cup my breasts and roll my soapy fingers over my tight nipples. I push a hand lower, teasing my fingertips over my stomach, glancing out into the changing room to make *sure* I'm alone before I push lower.

I groan quietly, my breath catching when my fingers push through my pussy lips and roll across my clit. Heat pools inside me, but it's frustrating, because while I can feel the initial stirrings of the sensation he gave me, it won't get any stronger no matter how hard I try.

Eventually, I step out of the shower and towel off, feeling annoyed.

No shame: I straight up preen in the mirror, fixing my hair, adding a touch of makeup, making sure my legs are completely smooth from my quick shave in the shower.

At my locker, I chew on my lip as I pull out the bag he gifted me. I've pretty much been hiding it in here because what the *hell* would I tell my friends?

Tonight, though, I wear some of the things that came *in* the bag. I grin as I pull on one of the obscenely expensive Nikolay Grishko warmup sets and some equally pricey Luckyloo legwarmers for no other reason than they look cute.

An anxious, eager sensation pools inside me as I check my reflection, bite back a grin, and practically *skip* out of the dressing room.

I'm no love-struck teenager. I know whatever this thing is between us isn't the beginning of anything real. C'mon. The man is twenty years older than me, the head of one of the biggest criminal organizations in the world, and hot enough that there's no *way* he's looking for anything more than fun.

But if that's all he's looking for, why can't it be all that *I'm* looking for too?

I mean, the man gave me my first real, actual, mind-blowing orgasm last night. And I quite enjoyed it. I would like it to happen again, frequently. If "this" ends up being just hormones, mutual attraction, and orgasms?

Sign me the fuck *up*.

It’s not like I’ve gone and fallen for the man.

Kir usually shows up after I arrive. So when I get to the studio, I go to the barre and start stretching out some of the ubiquitous knots from earlier today.

…Until the air in the room shifts, and my pulse skips.

He doesn’t even have to say anything to announce his presence. You can literally just *feel* the power that radiates off him.

I turn, trying my best to hide the huge grin on my face. I don’t succeed, and end up giving him this weird, awkward half-grin that makes me cringe even as I can’t stop doing it.

Slowly, my brows knit.

Kir’s not in his usual-these-days gym pants and sinfully tight t-shirt. He’s back in a suit, no tie, the top few buttons of his dress shirt open.

He also looks even colder than usual, if that's possible.

“So,” I begin, trying to hide the grin on my face and the annoying sparkly look in my eyes. “I was thinking we could pick up where we left off yesterday—”

Instantly I realize what I’ve just said, and my face explodes with heat.

“Not…I…I mean…” I stammer, feeling my cheeks blushing furiously before I find my voice again. “I meant with the variation,” I say quickly. ”Not…you know…the other thing.”

Kir says nothing. He just stands in the doorway, eying me.

“So…” I clear my throat. “I think if I start from the *bourrées*, I can—”

“I’m afraid our coaching sessions have reached an end, Ms. Ellis.”

I feel like I’ve been physically kicked in the stomach when the words leave his mouth. For five long seconds, I just stand there, all the giddiness of earlier shattering at my feet as I just stare at him.

“I…” I shake my head. “I don’t understand.”

“I can no longer assist you with private coaching,” he growls tightly. “But I wish you the best of luck with your callback with the *Ballet Imperiya Korona*.”

I stare at him numbly.

“Good night, Ms. Ellis.”

He starts to turn to leave, and something in me comes unfrozen.

“Wait, that’s *it*?”

Kir stops, his jaw tightening as his dark eyes slide back to me. “Yes. That’s it.”

The numb feeling begins to morph into bitterness, confusion, and, yes, anger. When he turns again to leave, the words tumble unbidden from my mouth.

“Is this because of what happened last night?”

Kir stops again, his chiseled jaw grinding as his eyes flash.

“It’s not.”

“*Bullshit*!” I blurt as he turns again. “That’s fucking *bullshit*!”

That gets his attention. He whirls back to me, his mouth opening.

“No,” I snap, cutting him off before he can even speak. “You don’t get to chastise me with the *language*, *Ms. Ellis* shit anymore,” I hiss. “Are we seriously done with all of this just because—”

“*Yes*,” he growls, taking a step toward me that sends my pulse skyrocketing. “Because of last night.”

“Well, that’s *bullshit*,” I snarl.

Kir’s brow furrows. “What happened last night was deeply inappropriate.”

I scoff. “Says the man who bent me over his knee and *spanked me*—”

“That’s enough, Ms. Ellis—”

“Before he put his fingers inside me and made me fucking *come* for the first time!” I finish.

The room goes quiet. Kir frowns, peering at me with dark curiosity that has my skin tingling and my face heating.

“Not…I mean…” My throat works. “I mean, the first time *you* made me come.”

“I’m not casting blame on either of us. You’re a grownup.”

“You’re much *more* grown up,” I snap back petulantly.

His mouth twists. “I’ve decided, Brooklyn. This is wrong.” He straightens up, rolling his shoulders as his eyes stab into me. “Good luck with your callback.”

He turns to leave, and I snap.

“How about you stop being a big fucking *pussy* and tell me the real reason you don’t want to be around me anymore. Not whatever bullshit fake—”

I gasp sharply, my eyes going wide as Kir whirls and surges into me. The whimper withers and dies in my throat as he wraps a hand around it, his eyes narrowing dangerously as he looms over me, getting right in my face.

“*Fine*,” he snarls. “How about *this* for a reason: you don’t know me *at all*. You know the nice me, who’s been playing ballet instructor with you. Who stopped a bunch of lowlifes from assaulting you. Who bought you decent clothes, and checked in on you, and was concerned about your situation.”

His face grows even more menacing and dark, his eyes flashing like black fire as he narrows the distance between us.

“But the thing is, *Ms. Ellis*,” he snarls, “*that isn’t the real me*. Believe me, you want nothing to do with him.”

His hand squeezes my windpipe, sending warning lights and vicious heat shooting through my core.

“The real me would *eat you alive*.”

Suddenly, just as quickly as it was there, his hand drops from my throat. He steps away from me, taking with him the heat of his body, the timbre of his deep, sultry-accented voice, and his citrusy pine scent.

“This ends *now*,” he growls. “Before I destroy you.”

Without another word, he turns and marches from the room.

I stand there numb and shaking, trying to tell myself he’s right. That I can take what he’s taught me so far and work on it to nail that callback.

All this was ever going to be, all it *needed* to be, was a bit of fun. All I wanted was mutual attraction and orgasms. No emotions. No feelings.

I swallow the sudden lump in my throat as the silence of the studio presses down around me.

…So why the fuck does it sting so much?

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18

BROOKLYN

On the plus side, no more coaching *also* means no more of Kir's grueling, punishing repetition, coupled with his critiques which were the exact opposite of "sugar-coated".

Poisonous? Toxic?

Or am I just describing this brief *thing* between us?

The downside, though, is that I think I'm slipping. For weeks, I've felt like I had this burst of energy propelling me forward. I could see the *Imperiya Korona* right there on the horizon. I could *taste it*.

Without Kir's personal guidance, that's fading.

Part of me wonders if any influence Kir has with Ivan Yelchin has also gone away. But who knows if us no longer working together…in either sense… affects that.

The other thing that's disappeared together with the private coaching is the anxious excitement I got toward the end of each day. Or, who am I kidding: even at the *start* of each day. The knowledge that whatever else happened today—the cops harassing me for parking where I shouldn't, or a crazy person at Fit World threatening me in the locker room—there was that delicious tingle waiting at the end of it.

Him.

Despite Kir's coldness and barked authoritarian orders, I *really* looked forward to being alone in that room with him.

Breathing the same air. Smelling his scent. Feeling his hands guiding and positioning me, even if I was already where I was supposed to be.

The worst part is, I'm pretty sure I know why it—whatever "it" was—ended: I'm not good enough.

Not in terms of ballet. There, I might be good enough. That's not what I mean.

I mean that *I*, Brooklyn, am not good enough. Not for someone like Kir, with his wealth, power, sophistication and elegance. I'm too rough, unpolished and dirty for someone in his world.

That's obviously why he ended this thing.

It's late when I get back to Pearl after an especially grueling rehearsal. I groan and sag against her trunk, dropping my dance bag to the ground.

I roll the tension from my shoulders, feeling the angry, painful rumble of my stomach.

I should really eat something. I mean, story of my life, the last year and change. But I had to pay Diego the other day, and I've been tightening my belt ever since.

Maybe a bit too much.

From my cooler, I grab a Pop Tart, banana, and half of a turkey club sandwich that I'm ashamed to admit I snagged yesterday when Milena tossed it in the garbage can in the changing room. Then I sink onto Pearl's trunk and dig in, groaning in relief when the food hits my empty stomach.

"I knew you were bullshitting me."

I choke on the sandwich, jumping off the trunk and whirling at the sound of James's voice. His eyes glint in the overhead glow of a single streetlight, his smile cold and cruel.

In the last year, when our paths have crossed, I *might* have mentioned that I wasn't at my old apartment anymore because I was sharing a place with my friend Maya.

"I'm not sure what you mean—"

I shudder when he steps toward me, my words failing as I slowly retreat.

"I don't fucking like it when you lie to me, baby," he hisses. "You know, I followed you to that chick Maya's place once." His lips curl dangerously. "You don't fucking live there, do you."

I try to smile as I force myself to face him. You can't cower around James. It makes him angry when you cower.

"No, I definitely *do* live—"

All at once, the wind rushes from my lungs as pain explodes through my stomach. I cry out, groaning in pain as his fists slam into me, doubling me over. Clearly, smiling makes him angry, too.

"I fucking *hate* when you lie to me, cunt," he snarls.

Suddenly, he's hauling me up by the hair and slamming me back against the side of Pearl.

"The. Thing. Is…" he grunts.

I whimper when his fist sinks into my stomach over and over before he yanks me upright. Nauseating pain curls inside me as naked fear wraps around my throat.

"*All* women are fucking liars," he hisses. "*And* fucking sluts. They need a strong man and a firm hand to remind them of their fucking *place*."

I gasp for air, shaking in pain and fear as he slams me against the car again.

"I think we're overdue, B," he snarls, an evil grin on his face. "I think you need to be reminded of your place."

I choke as he looms closer, his rancid, sour breath washing over me. Panic and terror claw at me. My pulse skips, my skin crawling as James grabs my shoulders and starts to push down.

My head spins. The world blurs. I glance down in slow motion, seeing the small but still horrifying bulge in his jeans as he snickers under his breath.

“C’mon, baby. You fucking owe me for lying to me. Take it out and fucking suck it like a good little—”

It’s a snap decision. Maybe it’s because I've been at rock bottom for a month now. Maybe it’s because I haven’t eaten all day and I’m fucking *starving*, and this asshole just interrupted my one meal.

Or maybe it’s because a certain Russian Bratva leader has been teaching me to face my fears.

Whatever the reason, when I decide to do it, there’s no hesitation.

James chokes out a pathetic, groaning whimper when my knee slams into his nuts. Once. Twice. Three times, sending him into a ball before I shove him away.

Then reality hits, and my face turns white when I consider what I've just done.

He’s going to fucking kill me.

With a cry, I whirl and yank open Pearl’s driver side door. I dive in and slam it shut, locking it just before James lurches to the window, pounding his fist against it. I scream, looking at him through the glass as his face contorts with rage.

“You’re fucking *dead*, bitch!!” he roars. “All I wanted was your fucking whore mouth,” he snarls. “But now? I’m gonna fuck that ass until you scream for me!”

I’m shaking so hard that I can barely see straight or function. I somehow yank my keys out and try to shove them into the ignition. James keeps banging on the window, screaming all the disgusting things he’s going to do to me as I desperately try to shove the key in.

Finally, success.

My pulse races, my breath coming in short, gasping chokes as I turn the key.

The battery ticks over, then goes silent.

No.

I try again, my very soul collapsing inside my chest as I hear the impotent *click-click-click* of Pearl's dead battery.

"Open the fucking door, bitch!!"

I jolt when James slams his forearm against the window.

"Open up, you fucking cunt!" he snarls, jabbing a finger at me, his face a mask of hatred. "Open it now and I'll show a little fucking mercy. You make me break it down and yank you out, I'm gonna make you cry!"

In a panic, I lurch into the back seat and yank the little curtain shut that gives me some privacy at night. James laughs coldly outside.

"Not gonna fuckin' stop me, you fucking bitch!"

He slams on the driver's side window again. Then it goes quiet. Just as I'm about to pull back the curtain on the window to see if he's gone, there's a horrible smashing sound accompanied by the sound of cracking glass.

Holy shit.

He's got a rock, or a brick, or *something*. When it slams against the window again, I can hear the glass splintering, like it's about to smash in.

When that happens, he'll have me.

I don't think I'll survive that.

My pulse thunders as I whirl, yanking my bedsheets off the back seat. My hands are shaking, the splintering sound of glass rattling my every nerve as I pull down the folding seat to reveal the trunk.

I crawl inside, my whole body shaking and trembling as I turn and yank the seat back into place, plunging me into darkness. I hear glass shattering, and bite back a scream when James roars triumphantly as he gets through the window.

“You’re fuckin’ mine now, you fucking cunt!” he bellows into the car. I hear the click of the lock—probably from him reaching through and unlocking it—before the front door wrenches open.

He’s going to find me.

He’s going to hurt me, and rape me, maybe even fucking kill me.

In a panic, I turn on my cell phone and whirl to the back of the dark trunk.

…The little emergency release tab dangles right in my face.

There’s no time to wonder if this will work.

It just *has to*.

I yank on the tab, my heart in my throat until the trunk pops open, streetlights flooding in. With a last burst of strength, I clamber out, whirling to see James half inside Pearl, his legs kicking in the air.

Without another thought I turn and fucking *run* without looking back.

Finally, my legs threaten to give out and my body wants to throw up calories I can’t spare. I’m trembling and heaving when I finally stutter to a stop outside a bodega maybe eight blocks away. I bend over, raggedly gasping for air before it hits me.

My dance bag.

My old stuff, sure, but also all the pretty new things that Kir bought me: the gorgeous, designer warmup outfits. The leotards. The Repettos. The new Freed of London pointe shoes that I went and got sized for the other day.

I left it all back there.

And there’s no going back now.

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19

KIR

"FUCKING GRUMP."

Despite the sour feeling that's persisted for days, I allow myself a small smirk.

"Uh-oh," Freya snickers into the phone, thirteen hours ahead of me in Kyoto. "That sounded dangerously like a smile, Kir."

I sigh, still smiling a little as I shake my head.

"You know, *Dad* might work, too."

She snorts. "I dunno. I've given it a spin a few times. It feels fucking weird."

She's not wrong.

Before we discovered that she was the daughter I quite literally never knew I had, Freya, together with her best friend Annika, worked for me as a world-class hacker and a world-class thief, respectively. It actually got to the point that I *thought* of them as daughters. So when that revelation came, it was both a strange and yet natural transition.

Still, the "dad" thing is…tricky.

"Let's go back to why you're being such a grump," she sighs.

I make a face as I take a sip of my coffee. It's eight in the morning here in New York, and nine at night in Kyoto.

Interestingly, we’re both just starting our days.

Freya has a rare skin condition called *xeroderma pigmentosum*, which essentially means she’s allergic to sunlight. Obviously, this means she’s been a night owl her whole life, but luckily, Mal, her husband, had no issue switching to a mostly nocturnal schedule himself.

“Just work,” I lie. “You know…the usual shit.”

“Gotcha. Oh, by the way, Isaak says hi and wanted to know if you saw his email about the Leginov deal.”

I chuckle. “Tell Isaak that if he contacts me again while he’s on holiday in Japan, I’ll stop *giving him* those holidays.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Freya shrieks. “It would break Kai’s heart, which would break *my* heart, and I’d never speak to you again, so there, *Pops*.”

I roll my eyes as she giggles.

Isaak, my number two, is in a serious relationship with Kai, the head of security for the Mori-kai Yakuza family—which is Freya’s family now. Obviously, him working in Tokyo and Kyoto, and Isaak working *here* in New York, creates a logistical issue, but they make it work.

Okay, I *help* make it work, either by giving Isaak time off or inventing bullshit "business" in Japan and insisting he go deal with it. Other times, since the Mori-kai does have some dealings here in New York, Kai comes here, and Isaak disappears for a week.

But I’m happy for him.

“I’m curious,” I frown. “What exactly do two of the biggest, toughest, most heavily muscled men I’ve ever met *do* when they go out on dates?”

“I’m gonna go with taking turns railing the *fuck* out of each other.” She snorts a laugh. “No, actually…” She sighs. “They’re fucking adorable. Kai goes all out on date night. He hired a master sushi chef to come give them a cooking class at the house the last time Isaak was here. I think they’re going to the imperial rose gardens in Tokyo tomorrow.”

I let out a long, dramatic yawn.

“Oh, fuck you,” Freya laughs. “They’re very happy and totally in love. You should try it sometime.”

“Eh,” I grunt. “Pass.”

“You’re not getting any younger, Kir.”

Tell me about it.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number nine thousand and seventy-two why I should *not* be involved with Brooklyn.

“On that insulting note, I have shit I need to do, Frey.”

“Same.” She exhales. “I hope whatever’s bugging you works itself out.”

“Actually, I sorted it last night. Talk to you soon?”

“For sure. Goodbye, *Father*,” she says with sarcastic, dramatic flair.

* * *

BUT AS I park the car down the street from The Mirage later that afternoon, I realize that I have *not*, in fact, “sorted it”.

Otherwise I wouldn't be here, still looking for answers.

I gather that Brooklyn only works here evenings: I've checked and there’s no cocktail waitresses in the afternoons, plus, she has rehearsals earlier.

Which is why I’ve picked this time of day to come.

There’s a new bouncer out front, and a sign promising “early bird specials” on wings. For some reason, getting wings at a strip club at five in the afternoon sounds profoundly depressing.

I walk in looking *nothing* like I normally do: jeans, a Knicks hoodie, a fucking Yankees cap pulled low over my eyes.

I despise watching most professional sports unless they involve combat. They’re all so…*boring*.

Inside, I grab a beer at the bar and take a seat a little way back from the stage. A redhead on the pole is dancing to a Nine Inch Nails song. I love the tune, but I've never been able to get into the whole strip club scene.

Again, boring, and *so* fucking fake.

But I do admire the women who work at places like this. I sit there sipping my shitty beer, watching the game unfold with amused interest: the pathetic, sad men who eagerly hand over their money, clinging desperately to the illusion that any of these women might fuck them if they just gave them *one* more twenty, or bought one more stupidly overpriced drink.

"You look lonely over here, handsome."

An Asian girl with blonde streaks in her hair and a *substantial* amount of silicone in her tits stops in front of me with a grin. She's wearing a mint green G-string and a mesh triangle top that shows off her impressive, surgically enhanced assets.

She's pretty. I bet away from the neon lights of this place, without all the heavy makeup, the outfit, and the hint of boredom in her eyes, she's beautiful.

But that's not why I'm here.

"I *am* actually looking for some company." I smile at her and gesture to the chair next to me. "Why don't you join me."

She smiles suggestively, her eyes dropping to my lap. "How about I sit somewhere *else*, and we can—"

"No. Right there is fine."

Her brow furrows a little. But then she shrugs and sits next to me.

"So, baby," she purrs, stroking my forearm, "what did you want to talk about?"

"Are you close with the other girls who work here?"

She bats her eyes. "You want me to bring a friend into this? That's cool—"

I shake my head. "That's not what I meant. Are you *friendly* with them."

She smiles a completely fake smile. “Oh, I *love* girls, baby.”

I exhale slowly, pull out my money clip, and peel off five hundreds.

“That,” I sigh, pressing the money into her palm, “is for you to drop the act.”

She smiles coyly. “What act, baby?”

I roll my eyes. “Fair enough.”

I hand her another three hundred and arch a brow. “I appreciate shrewd negotiating, but that's as high as I'm prepared to go.”

She flashes a much more genuine smile, takes the cash, and tucks it into her top.

“So,” she says, her voice instantly losing the overly porny huskiness. “What are we talking about?”

“How about we start with your name.”

“Jade.”

I hold out another hundred.

“Your real name.”

“Stacy—”

She frowns when I yank the bill back, giving her a look.

“…Caroline,” she finally mumbles.

That actually sounds like the truth. I hand her the money.

“Are you friendly with the other girls who work here, Caroline?”

She shrugs. “Friendly enough, I guess.”

“So friendly that you’ll keep it to yourself if I ask you about a specific girl?”

She smirks and glances significantly at my pocket with the money clip. Fuck, she’s good at this.

I hand her another two hundred and arch my brow. “How are we feeling about keeping secrets *now*?”

“Pretty fucking great!” She smiles widely at me. “But I’m not putting any of the girls in danger. If I get creep vibes—”

“Do I *give* creep vibes?”

She eyes me judiciously. “Not *yet*. But you could be a murderer, for all I know.”

And you could be righter than you want to know.

“I’m curious about one of the cocktail waitresses who works here. Goes by the name Cherry.”

Caroline smiles. “Oh, Cherry Pie.” She shrugs. “I don’t care what some of the girls say, I like her.”

I stiffen. “What do some of the girls say?”

She sighs. “They’re just jealous because the girl can actually dance. Like, I think she does ballet or something, too?” She shrugs again. “I don’t know, but she’s a sweetie.” She makes a face. “Honestly, a little *too* sweet for this place.”

Something she just said makes me go still.

“What do you mean, the other girls are jealous because she can dance?”

She shrugs. “I mean, the girl has serious *moves*. It makes her a *ton* of—”

“I was under the impression that she was a cocktail waitress here.”

Caroline smiles wryly. “You’re not the first guy to get that line, baby.” She shakes her head. “She’s doesn’t serve drinks. She’s one of our top dancers.”

I. See. Fucking. *Red*.

Pure, unadulterated savagery roars through my veins as I picture Brooklyn seductively peeling off her clothes as jeering men whistle and leer. Swinging around one of those fucking poles. Bending over. Showing them everything.

Wriggling in their goddamn laps, grinding on their fucking dicks, *letting them touch her*…

"Hey…"

I blink back to reality when I feel a hand on mine. I glance down and see Caroline touching the back of my tightly clenched fist, my fingers digging viciously into the cheap "leather" upholstery.

"You okay, baby?"

"*Fine*," I hiss before I clear my throat, trying to collect myself. "I'm fine."

I'm about to ask her which of the men currently in this fucking place are regulars, have seen Brooklyn dance, or have put their filthy hands on her, so I can summarily execute them here and now. But before I can, she takes a deep breath.

"I worry about her, you know."

I lean closer. "Because she doesn't belong in a place like this?"

Caroline nods. "Well, that and…" She trails off, glancing at my pocket again.

"I'm not paying you any more money," I growl.

She grins. "You *sure*?"

Fuck, she's good.

I peel off *another* hundred and hand it over. Caroline grins, tucking it between her tits, then makes a face, sighs, and leans a little closer.

"Look, this isn't like, public knowledge or anything. But…well… She *says* she lives with Maya, this other girl who works here, but I know Maya pretty well and I've been to her place a hundred times. She lives alone."

My frown deepens. "So where do you think Cherry lives?"

Caroline eyes me. "Why do you care? You her dad or something?"

Dad. I grimace. "Just a concerned friend."

“Uh-huh.”

I cock a brow. “Do I *look* like a sexual predator?”

Her lips thin. “They rarely do, baby.”

Touché.

“*Look*,” I growl. “I know her through her other job, at the ballet. I’m worried about her. She’s incredibly talented, but she’s clearly in trouble, and she’s slipping. I want to be there to catch her when—not if—she falls.”

Caroline slides her eyes over me, nodding.

“Okay, that was good. A little practiced, but good.”

“Good enough for you to trust me?”

“Another two hundred would *definitely* make me trust you.”

Jesus.

I scowl as I hand it over. “Where does she live?”

Caroline glances around and leans closer. “Again, this isn’t like, public knowledge. But I have eyes, and…well, I’ve been there myself,” she says hollowly. She takes a breath. “Pretty sure she’s living out of her car.”

I go still.

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, come on. Carries toiletries around with her in her bag? Usually has extra changes of clothes? Never has anyone over, never shares a cab with anyone after work?” She gives me a look. “And when she takes the subway home, it’s to wildly different neighborhoods all over the city.” She sighs. “That’s not a girl who moves house a lot. That’s a girl who has to move *her car* a lot to avoid tickets, suspicion, creeps…that sort of thing. Like I said…” She looks right at me, her face stony. “*I’ve been there*. And that girl?” She shakes her head. “She's *way* too sweet for the streets. I’m amazed she’s lasted as long as she has.”

Cold numbness throbs inside me. It’s partly rage—fury at the cards Brooklyn has been dealt: poverty, the fact that she fucking works *here*, taking her clothes off for money and all the fucking shit that comes with that.

But there's something else I feel, which is foreign to me.

The need to protect. To shield her from the darkness of a world that keeps trying to drag her down.

To save her from it.

And also, a burning desire to *destroy* that darkness, as well as anyone who tries to come near what’s *mine*.

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20

BROOKLYN

“WAIT, you’re seriously not coming with?”

I smile as I look up at Val from where I'm stretching on the studio floor. He’s with Naomi and Evelina, who are both, like him, already showered and dressed.

A few of my friends made plans to go out to dinner before hitting what has become our new favorite club, Doomsday, after rehearsal today. But there’s no way I can join them.

I barely have two dollars to rub together at this point, and I don’t even have anything suitable to wear anymore.

I ended up calling Evie after I ran from James, making up some crap about my building management spraying for cockroaches and asking to crash at her place for the night.

I figured she’s single, unlike most of my friends, so it’d just be the two of us. Also, Evie’s pretty naive, so she’d be the least likely of my friends to notice anything wrong and press me on it. I know that sounds shitty, but I mean it in the nicest way. Evie is just…*sweet.*

The third reason, much as I hate to admit it, is that Evie lives with her dad.

As in, at a heavily guarded Bratva fortress of a mansion.

As in, somewhere I might *actually* get some sleep without worrying James would find me.

I sigh, shaking my head. “Nah, I want to get some conditioning in. Then I need to go back to my place and make sure pest control didn’t leave my door unlocked or anything.”

He groans. “*Fine*… I guess.” He frowns, stretching his muscled, tattooed arms overhead before shoving his fingers through his hair. “Nothing I can do to convince you?” He gives me a look only I see and mouths “My treat.”

I know he says it because he gets me. But I shake my head.

“Next time. Promise.”

He doesn’t push.

Val is a *gem*. He knows enough about my life, having lived a similar one, that he gets when I need a hand. But he *also* gets that sometimes, you’re just down, but that doesn’t automatically mean you’re looking for help.

“You sure?” Naomi smiles. “A little birdie told me *Laz* is going to be there…”

I roll my eyes. Laz Kislev, a Bratva heir who tends to pal around with Roman, his friend Bane Antonov, and guys like Naomi’s boyfriend Nico Barone and his older brother Carmine, has met up with us when we’re out a few times in the past. He's also a co-owner of Doomsday, and makes sure we get a VIP table whenever we go.

He and I flirted like *once*, months ago, maybe danced a bit together. And Naomi’s been barking up that tree ever since, hoping to set Laz and I up.

Yeah, *not* gonna happen.

I mean he’s hot enough: tall, in crazy good shape, dark hair, ice-blue eyes, tattoos for *days*. But he’s not really my type.

Too much of a party boy.

Too wild and crazy.

Too young…

My face heats as the thought slides into my brain. Laz is like twenty-seven, which is a few years older than me. But I know what that obnoxious little

voice is talking about.

He's not in his forties, with a razor-sharp jaw, dark hair just beginning to silver at the temples, and a rough, masculine edge to him that….*does things* to me.

He's not Kir.

Yeah, I want to punch that little voice in the throat for even bringing it up.

"Well, tell Laz I said hi," I grin. "But for real, Naomi—not my type."

All three of them give me a look.

"Dude, if *that* isn't your type, I'm not convinced you're straight," Val grunts. "That motherfucker is *sin*. Bet he's hung like a fucking ox, too."

Poor Evelina's face turns crimson as she spins to our friend.

"Val!" she squeaks, making Naomi and Val laugh before the former wraps an arm around her shoulder affectionately.

The three of them start to leave, but Evie hangs back. I smile as I stand.

"Thanks again for letting me crash last night."

She shakes her head. "Oh, it was a real hardship finding space in my dad's one-hundred-gajillion-square-foot house for you. You owe me," she says dryly.

I grin. "Glad you could squeeze me in."

She keeps smiling at me, but I see something behind her eyes as she sucks her lower lip between her teeth, her brows knitting.

"Evie?"

She sighs. "Are you okay?"

I shrug. "Me? Yeah, I'm fine."

Her brow stays furrowed. "Look, if you don't want to talk about it, that's cool. But I'm here, and I'm your friend—"

“Evie… What are we talking about?”

Her lips purse. “I get that I’m the token innocent one, okay?” She shrugs. “A bit sheltered, never had a boyfriend, gets wasted off half a drink, blah blah blah.”

“Evie—”

“Don't get me wrong,” she shrugs. “I *like* my role in our friend group. It really doesn’t bother me, you know, being ‘the sheltered one’.” She flashes a grin. “I mean, *I am*.” Then she sighs. “Just, don’t confuse me never having had sex with me being a clueless idiot, okay?”

I frown deeply. “Evie, I would *never*—”

“Brooklyn, you called me last night asking to crash at my house, then showed up with *nothing*. No pajamas, no toothbrush—”

“I told you,” I say quickly. “My building management didn't give us notice and just started spraying. I couldn’t—”

“You also looked scared half to death—no, *stop*, this is what I’m talking about.” She smiles sadly. “I’m *sheltered*, Brooklyn, but I still have eyes. You were terrified when you arrived. And then halfway through the night—I’m not sure if you even remember—you were having some kind of a nightmare in the next room, and I went to check on you, and the PJs I lent you, the top was riding up…” She peers at me with sad eyes. “Where’d you get that bruise on your stomach?”

I swallow, a whining noise in my ears.

“I...”

She shakes her head. “Look, Brooklyn, I’m happy to let you sleep at my place, and lend you pajamas and a toothbrush. You don’t have to tell me. Just please don’t *lie*.”

I wince, looking down.

“James,” I murmur. “I ran into James last night.”

“Oh my *God*, Brooklyn—”

“It’s fine, really,” I say. “It’s not what you think, not really. We got into a fight, and he pushed me. I turned too fast and tripped over a parked bike on the street. That’s all.”

I *hate* looking into the eyes of people who love me, and lying like this.

But my whole life is a wobbly house of cards right now. Making the James thing a big deal means getting the authorities involved, and they'll find out where I’ve been living for the last year, and it'll all come crashing down.

The *Imperiya Korona* wants no part of that.

“*Please* don’t tell anyone,” I say quietly. “It’ll get back to Val, and he’ll go find James and it’ll be this whole big insane thing.”

Evelina’s face falls. “I won’t, if you don’t want me to. But Brooklyn, you *need* to deal with James. He keeps coming back into your life, and he’s dangerous, and—”

“I know,” I croak quietly. “I’m taking care of it. I… I’m actually filing a restraining order tonight. That’s another reason I can’t go out.”

God, these lies…

“Do you want to come back to my house again tonight?” she asks.

No, because I have to go take my clothes off and dance on a fucking pole so I can keep the one family member I have left out of jail.

I smile and shake my head. “I’m good, but thank you. Really.”

“Love you,” she sighs, giving me big hug. “Don’t forget that.”

I smile weakly. “Love ya too, Evie.”

And I’m so sorry for lying to you.

* * *

EARLY THIS MORNING, I left Evie’s early and slunk back to where I’d parked Pearl.

It…wasn’t great.

Some of my crappy shit—my beaten-up flats, my older dance gear, a few bits of my rattier clothing—was still there, if strewn on the street and sidewalk.

The good stuff was gone: the bag with all the fancy dance gear Kir bought me. The new Freeds. All of it.

Also, someone had used my windowless, unlocked car to shelter from the rain last night, where they also smoked about three packs of cigarettes and possibly crack in the front seat.

Awesome.

Luckily, most of my dance stuff—The Mirage stuff, not ballet—I keep in my locker there. So after rehearsal and after I park Pearl with her new taped-up driver’s side window in Soho, I take the subway to the club.

“Full house out there tonight, babes,” Lucy blurts, jogging into the backstage changing room holding her bra, panties, and an armful of cash. She drops it all on the chair in front of her vanity, stuffs the cash into a lockable drawer, then starts cleaning up with wet wipes before pulling on a fresh pair of underwear.

On the one hand, a packed club means tons of money.

On the other, it means *more men*.

Leering. Whistling. Screaming disgusting shit while you demean yourself.

Oh joy.

I finish getting dressed while another girl, Caroline, heads out on stage. I opt for the schoolgirl outfit again, just because it’s always a crowd-pleaser, and pair the plaid micromini-skirt, knotted blouse, and knee-highs with a plaid and black matching demi-bra and thong.

I touch up my makeup and pull my hair into two high ponytails, finishing just as Caroline sashays back into the dressing room with her own pile of bills.

“You’re up, Brooklyn,” she says, her gaze staying on me for a while.

I frown. “Everything okay?”

She flashes an awkward smile. “Yeah, all good.” She frowns. “Look, this is going to sound weird, but you don't have like, a dad, or an uncle or something who might be looking for you?”

I blink. “Nope. Why?”

“Give it up for the verrry sexxxy CHERRY PIE!!!” the DJ roars into the mic.

Maya turns from where she’s putting on makeup at her vanity and shoots me a look. “That time, B. You ready?”

“Yeah.” I give Caroline another confused look, but she just shakes her head.

“Forget it. Go make money. Tell you later.”

I’ve done this more times than I care to think, but there’s still a pulse of anxiety that hums through me when I walk out onto stage, listening to the hooting and whistling jeers of the crowd.

It’s not the same thrilling buzz I get before a ballet performance. I *love* that kind of nervous excitement.

This feels…gross. Dirty. Cheap.

And just plain scary.

So I do what I always do: escape into my head.

I push it all away: the men, the music, the cat-calls, the thrown dollar bills. I tell myself I’m giving just another dance performance as I prance across the stage and grab the pole. I spin, stopping with my back to the audience and bending over, *hating* the sounds they make when I flash my underwear.

I lose the blouse first, tossing it to the side and cupping my breasts as I cat-walk to the front of the stage. I turn around, and *again*, I bend at the waist, lowering my head all the way to my knees before I turn to wink at the audience from between my legs as I flash a full view of my ass.

Suddenly I *freeze,* and my stomach drops through the floor.

Because there, at the very back of the audience, behind the rest of them, is a pair of dark, piercing, devil eyes, *ripping* into me.

No.

Please God, no.

For a second, I just stay where I am: bent over in a fucking *schoolgirl* outfit and pigtails, my mouth open in horror.

Bitter, poisonous shame like I've never felt before…which is saying something…floods through me. I almost trip as I stand up, my pulse slowly hammering in my chest and roaring in my ears as I turn and stare back at Kir.

Whatever I felt before, feeling too dirty for someone like him, or broken, or messy, increases to gigantic proportions as I stand there, feeling his eyes on me.

Seeing me at my absolute worst, strutting around on stage like a jailbait whore offering herself for money.

I hear the yells, the whistles, the screams to "take it *off*!" But I'm just numb and frozen, feeling my entire reality crumble around me.

Suddenly, I turn and bolt from the stage, my heart racing and cold, sickly horror coursing through my veins.

I avoid the changing room because I can't deal with any of them right now. I just have to get away—from this place, from Kir, from the shame—

"You little *bitch*!"

I scream when I'm grabbed from behind, the stench of body odor and cheap cigars making me gag as I'm shoved along the back hallway. Then I whirl, and my face goes white when I see Lou's snarling face.

"Lou, I—"

"*Get in there*!"

I yelp as he shoves me against the door to his office, reaches past, and opens it. I almost trip when he pushes me inside and storms in, slamming the door shut behind him.

I've seen Lou angry before, but this is something new altogether.

"It was *you*, you little cunt!" he yells, so loudly that I find myself stumbling back until my ass hits the edge of his desk.

"Lou, I don't know—"

"ZAK!" he roars at me. "I couldn't get a look at the motherfucker who kicked his ass on any of our cameras out front. But you know what I *did* see?!"

He storms right into my personal space.

"Security footage from outside my fucking office! And guess what?! I saw Zak, giving you one stupid punch, like you deserve! And the *very next fucking day*, some guy waltzes in, and just about kills the guy who hit you!!"

My face pales. "Lou—"

"You owe me a fucking bouncer!" he screams at me, spittle flying from his lips and into my face. "But I don't think you've got one of those on you. So this is how we're gonna do it."

Lou grabs me and violently spins me around, then shoves me across his desk, his weight slamming into me and pinning me hard against the surface.

He shoves my hands to the far side of the desk, and suddenly, he's looping a rope around my wrists and yanking it tight.

"*NO!*" I scream. "NO!! LOU! STOP IT!!"

He's huffing with rage as he stands up.

The jangle of his belt buckle is like a bullet being chambered.

"*NOOO*!!" I scream as loud as I can. "STOP IT!"

“I’m gonna do what I shoulda done a *long* fuckin' time ago, cunt,” he snarls as his pants hit the floor. “I’m gonna take what you owe me out of this fucking ass, *right now*.”

I scream out a blood-curdling, wretched sound as he shoves my skirt up and grabs my vagina from behind. His fingers poke and prod, nails scraping my inner thighs as he claws at the edge of my panties and yanks them down.

Hot tears spill down my cheeks as his hands and fingers touch and pinch and grab. I go numb as I hear him step behind me, trying to shove his fingers into me as his other hand jerks his dick.

The office door splinters like it's been hit with a wrecking ball, smashing off its hinges and breaking apart as a figure in a black suit surges in like the Devil himself.

Kir.

It’s all too much. I squeeze my eyes tightly shut, sobbing and shaking all over as I hear fists smashing into flesh and Lou screaming in agony, bleating for mercy that I doubt is coming.

Then the cries and begging stop, but I keep hearing that same rhythmic wet sound of a fist slamming against bloodied flesh, again and again.

Then it's over.

I flinch, sobbing out a broken cry as hands gently undo the rope around my wrists. It’s only then that I open my eyes to see Kir in front of me.

His dark eyes meet mine, his face a mask of pure vengeance and fury, but also crumpled with…pain? Sadness? Sympathy?

“I’m going to get you out of here,” he murmurs. “To do that, I’m going to have to touch you. Nod if that’s okay.”

Tears trickle down my cheeks as my chin moves up and down. Kir’s jaw sets as he stands.

He pulls his jacket off and wraps it around my shoulders. Then, without a word, he lifts me into his arms, cradling me like a child, one arm around my back and the other under my knees.

Silently, he steps through the shattered office door, walks down the hallway and kicks open the back door to the club, carrying me out into the night.

Away from it all.

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KIR

THE IMPULSE IS TO KILL.

To go directly back to that fucking place and free all the innocents before chaining the doors shut and setting the whole thing ablaze.

Or perhaps something more personal. Something I can *savor*.

I only stopped myself—somehow—from killing that piece of shit who was trying to put his dick in her because I remembered that The Mirage is owned by Dimitri Moskovic and is one of his money laundering operations here.

Whatever the agreement is between us, it's fragile at best. I feel that murdering the manager of one of the places he's cleaning his money before our deal forces him out of New York would throw a wrench into the works.

I'm not through with that motherfucker I left bleeding and unconscious in a puddle of his own piss and shit in that office, though.

Not by a fucking *mile*.

However, the impulse to murder, maim, and seek revenge is on hold for now.

She's my only focus.

Brooklyn's been silent the entire drive back to my house—wrapped in my jacket, curled up in the passenger seat, staring out the window.

I don’t blame her.

When I pull to a stop at the back door of my home, I walk around to her side, open the door, and kneel down to look her in the eye.

“I’m going to pick you up again and carry you inside. Is that all right?”

She nods quietly, dazed but slowly focusing her eyes on mine. Her brow knits.

“Why do you keep asking permission?” she whispers.

My jaw grinds at the question and what it suggests about the current—and probably past—state of her life.

“I’m not one of the monsters you’ve apparently been around,” I growl tightly. My brow furrows. “You need to understand something. When I take you in there, you’ll be in my world. I may touch you. I may push you, figuratively. But I will never do a single thing to you that you do not consent to. Is that clear.”

Her lip slips between her teeth, her blue eyes hazy as she nods. Then I start to reach for her, but she tenses sharply enough that I stop.

“Why…” Her browns knit. “You told me we were done,” she croaks. “That you wanted nothing to do with me.”

My eyes narrow. “That is not—”

“*Why are you helping me like this?*” she blurts in a hushed little voice.

My jaw sets as I slip my arms underneath her and lift her out of the car.

“Because I give a shit. That’s why.”

Inside, I carry her upstairs. I won’t lie: there’s a strong impulse to take her to my bedroom, and my reasons aren’t remotely pure.

Because I’ve tasted her mouth and felt the soft touch of her tongue. I’ve heard her whimper and moan. I’ve felt the hot flush on her skin and seen the subtle arch of her back when I spanked her bare ass.

…Felt the tight, velvety strangle of her cunt around my fingers as she shattered and came for me.

All those memories are waging flat-out *war* on the part of me that is trying to help her right now. The part that wants to protect and shield her from the world.

And I'm honestly not quite sure which side is going to take the battle.

Somehow, I resist the urge to take her to my room, opting instead for the guestroom where I had her before, since it will be a little familiar to her.

I sit her on the edge of the bed and step away.

"Don't move. I'll be right back."

Downstairs in the kitchen, I put the kettle on and grab a bottle of water. After the kettle boils, I pour it over a bag of chamomile tea before I head back upstairs.

Brooklyn is *exactly* where I left her. On the edge of the bed, wearing…*that*.

My eyes darken as I replay the moment I walked into that fucking place and saw her on stage: dressed like a fucking teen porn star, hair in pigtails, bent over and showing her ass split by a thong to a room of lecherous, whistling men.

It's genuinely a miracle I didn't kill anyone.

I want to rip the goddamn costume from her body. But first, I need answers.

It's partly self-serving. Even if I'm trying to convince myself it's so I can better help her, the truth is it's so I know how deep the chasm is that I'm in with her. Because I *am* in there with her. No question.

I need to know how far of a climb we have out.

Is it *just* stripping? Or something worse? I mean, Caroline was pretty confident that Brooklyn was homeless and living out of her fucking car. If she's been taking her clothes off and swinging from a pole, maybe giving motherfucking lap dances, is there…*shit*…more?

I hand her the bottle of water and watch as she opens it and takes a small sip before handing it back to me.

“More. Hydrating will help with the shakes.”

Her throat works. “I don’t have…”

Her eyes drop to the trembling hand holding the bottle of water.

“*Oh*,” she says quietly. She takes another few sips.

I set the tea on the bedside table and drop to my haunches in front of her.

“I’m going to ask you some questions now,” I say quietly. “I’d like you to answer them truthfully.”

Her face caves a little as she looks down.

“Look, I… I really do appreciate this. But it’s fine. You can just drive me to the nearest subway and—”

“*Stop*.”

There’s a cold firmness to my tone that makes her flinch.

“I believe I told you a while ago that you wouldn’t lie to me again.”

Her eyes snap to mine, hardening a little. “That was…” She swallows and looks down at her hands.

“That was *what*.”

“*Before*,” she whispers.

“Before what, Brooklyn.”

“Before you cast me aside!” she cries out, her voice shaking. “Before…” She exhales, squeezing her eyes shut. “Forget it. Just—”

She flinches when I reach out and cup her jaw in my hand, holding it firmly as I lift her face up to mine.

“I didn’t *cast you aside*,” I rumble. “I was trying to save you.”

She looks at me with defiance in her eyes. “*From*?”

“*Me*.”

She blinks quickly, taking a shaky breath. “So… Why am I here now?”

“Because I've seen that there are people out there trying to get their hands on you than are even *worse* than me.”

Her lips twist wryly. “Are you calling yourself the lesser of two evils?”

“More like ‘better the devil you know’,” I murmur.

Brooklyn smiles just a little, her eyes finding mine.

“What were your questions?”

“Do you promise not to lie to me? Because *I’ll know*,” I rumble, my grip tightening on her chin.

She nods. “Okay. Go ahead—no, wait.”

I shoot her a scowl. “Excuse me?”

“Before you…question me, or whatever…”

“You’re not on trial, Brooklyn, I’m merely—”

“Yeah…no shit.”

My brow arches. She smiles quietly, biting her lip.

“I know,” she says, blushing. “*Language, Ms. Ellis,*” she huffs out with a stodgy, Winston Churchill-ish accent.

“Was that supposed to be me?”

“O*bviously*.”

I feel a smirk pull on my lips. “What were you going to say.”

“How long will I be here?”

You’ll never LEAVE.

I let my eyes drift over her, searching for words that aren’t, well, *that*.

“There is no end date.”

Something squeezes inside my chest when her lips curl into a small smile.

“*Okay*,” she says quietly.

“Was there anything else.”

She nods. “Yeah.” Brooklyn’s face warms as she looks down at her lap. “What does…I mean, me being here, and us, and… I mean, you pushed me away…”

“I’ve explained that.”

“Still,” she shrugs. “Now you bring me here and basically tell me I’m not allowed to leave.”

I nod. “And?”

Her throat bobs up and down. “What does that *mean*? Like, for…you know…”

“For us,” I finish. “That’s what you were going to say, isn't it.”

She lifts a shoulder, looking away.

“I believe we’ve already established that I’m simply the devil you know, Brooklyn. And lest we forget, I’m, what, twenty years older than you—”

“I’ve never felt what I feel when I’m with you.”

The words tumble from her lips. Instantly, her eyes widen, her hand flying up to cover her mouth as she stares at me with a mix of horror and shock.

“I—that wasn't supposed to come—”

Suddenly, I cup her face, lean close, and inhale deeply, pressing my forehead to hers.

“The only reason,” I growl, “that I’m not kissing the absolute *fuck* out of you right now is that I need to ask you these questions first. And if I start kissing you, that’ll *never* happen, because I won’t ever *stop*.”

She lets out a small gasp as her hands slide up to wrap around my wrists, her thumbs rubbing my skin as she exhales slowly.

“*So why ask them*?” she whispers. “What difference does it make?”

“I need to know who I’m going to be fucking burying, babygirl.”

Our eyes are barely inches apart, locked.

“I’m scared of what you’re going to ask me,” she says.

“You have *nothing* to be ashamed of,” I hiss. “And nothing to worry about.”

She nods, closing her eyes. “*Okay, just ask*,” she whispers.

I pull back, my hands dropping from her face, my fingers tangling with hers.

This time, I’m not worried about “what this is” or “what it means”. All I give a fuck about right now is finally allowing myself to accept that what I feel when I’m even *near* this woman is unlike anything I’ve ever felt with anyone.

“Where have you been living recently. The truth.”

Her eyes squeeze tighter shut.

“My car.”

Jesus.

“How long?”

“A year.” She swallows. “Maybe a little more.”

“And besides the Zakharova, you’ve been working at The Mirage.”

She nods again, her eyes still closed.

“Tell me what you actually do there.”

Her face falls.

“I don’t *mind*,” I continue. “But I need to know.”

I need to know how deep a hole she's in. Not for my fucking ego: it's not about me. It's about *her*, and seeing if there's damage above what I can fix.

…To be blunt, I need to know if stripping has devolved into turning tricks.

Even if the answer may rip me in two.

"I…" She takes a breath. "I dance. On stage. Her eyes are still closed as her brow furrows deeply. "I strip," she finally chokes out.

"On the pole."

She nods. My jaw tightens.

"Do you give lap dances."

She tries to pull away, but I hold her hands tightly, keeping her right where she is.

"I want you to know, Brooklyn," I growl, "that I have at times done things for money that make dancing to get men to part with their money look like puppy sitting. There is *no* judgment here."

She swallows again, nodding.

"*Yeah*," she says. "Lap dances. But, I mean, not often—"

"You don't owe me an explanation," I say gently. I take a slow, deep breath, bracing myself for an answer I don't want to hear. "Anything else?"

She frowns. "Well, serving drinks."

"That's not what I meant."

Her eyes snap open, her jaw dropping as she stares at me. "What?! You mean, like…like *prostitution*?" She blinks quickly. "*No*!"

"I mean anything else that sometimes happens in the shadier corners of strip clubs that you may have had to do to survive."

She shakes her head, her hands tightening on mine. "*No*," she croaks again. "Nothing like that."

Thank fuck.

“That man that I…” I clear my throat. “*Dealt with* tonight.” I look deep in her eyes. “Has he ever done that before? Forced himself on you?”

She winces. “He...” She takes a shaky breath. “Not like that. He’s…touched me before.”

She shudders and looks away. Good. Otherwise, she’d see the *murderous* look on my face.

“Has anyone else at the club hurt you?”

Her mouth purses. “Yeah, the doorman, Zak. But,” she shrugs, “someone recently—”

“Beat him to a bloody fucking pulp in the men's room?”

Her head snaps around, her eyes finding mine and widening.

“How do you—” Her mouth forms an O shape. “*You*?” she gasps.

My jaw tightens. “*Nobody* fucks with you,” I growl tensely. “Ever.”

A huge grin spreads over her face, her hands tightening in mine.

“I…” She blushes and looks down before she drags her eyes back to mine. “I really want to kiss you right now.”

I smile. “I want to kiss you, too. But if I do, it won’t stop at kissing.”

Her face heats. “And that’s a bad thing?”

My smile turns hungry. “No. But after something like earlier…” I shake my head. “You’re still in shock. Even if you don’t think you are, trust me, *you are*.”

She nods, raking her teeth over her bottom lip.

“Next question. Where’s all your money going, Brooklyn. You must take home a ton of cash from that place.”

Her shoulders collapse. “It’s…complicated.”

“I’ll decide that.”

She smiles a little, lifting her eyes to mine. “It’s my stepdad, Derrick.” She sighs. “He’s in prison awaiting trial for grand larceny. I *know* he's innocent.”

I frown. “He's in prison awaiting trial?”

She blows air through her lips. “He’s got *tons* of priors.” She shakes her head. “Look, he screwed up in the past. Like, a lot. But after Mom died, he was the only family I had, and he *really* tried with me. I mean, he wasn’t a world-class parent, but he gave it his all until the system finally took me.”

I frown. “The foster care system?”

She nods.

Fuck me. She’s *never* gotten a break, ever.

“So… You’re paying his legal bills.”

She exhales slowly. “*Yeah*.”

Not anymore, she’s not. But we’ll get there, slowly. Brooklyn is clearly not one for handouts or even mentioning her troubles to people. She’s got a large, close-knit group of dancer friends at the Zakharova, and she’s been living out of her car for a fucking year instead of swallowing her pride and asking any of them if she could crash on their couch.

I’m going to guess not one of them knows about The Mirage, either. It's probably why she was working way the fuck out in Greenpoint instead of in Manhattan.

She didn’t want anyone to know.

Brooklyn glances at me. “Was that it for questions?”

My head slowly shakes. “Just one more.”

I take her hands in mine, lifting them to my lips and kissing her knuckles softly as my gaze locks with hers. I know this last one will be painful.

“Who hurts you?” I murmur. “Not those fuckers at the club, there’s someone else. *Who is it*.”

There’s zero hesitation. Her face darkens and her mouth pulls to a cold line.

“*James*,” she blurts venomously. “He…” She grits her teeth. “We used to date.”

I resist the urge to get up and punch the fucking wall. Barely.

“He’s…not a nice guy,” she says quietly. “At all.”

I scowl. “You’re broken up?”

Her eyes snap to mine. “Of course.”

“And the motherfucker still hurts you?”

She glances down. “Any chance he can.”

Yeah, that’ll be *another* thing that stops right the fuck now. I start to picture all the ways I’ll slowly and methodically maim, torture, and kill the little fuck—for touching her, and *having her*, obviously, but even more, for daring to hurt her.

To hurt what’s *mine* now.

Brooklyn sighs a little, and I can tell she’s done.

So am I. For *now*.

“Are there any more questions?”

I shake my head. “No, babygirl, that's it.”

Brooklyn’s eyes drop as she looks to the floor, her fingers twisting together as her teeth work over her lower lip.

“*You must think I’m disgusting*,” she whispers quietly, her voice so fucking brittle and breakable. “The sinful things I’ve done…”

My head slowly shakes side to side as I cup her jaw, lifting her eyes to mine. “You think I’m a saint?”

Her lips twist. “No.”

“What do you think I am?”

She swallows.

“Tell me,” I growl quietly

She smiles wryly. “Better the devil you know, right?”

“You’ve known too many devils,” I murmur darkly. “But now you’ll just know *one*.” She trembles as my thumb strokes across her jawline, my eyes piercing into hers. “*I’m* your devil now, little sinner. I’m your *only* devil, and you’re my only sin.”

She blushes as her eyes hold mine. “So… Now what?” she says shyly.

“*Now*,” I growl, “I can do this.”

And then I grab her face in my hands, lean in, and crush my mouth to hers in a punishing, conquering kiss.

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22

BROOKLYN

He kisses me until I can't breathe. When he finally goes to move away, I grab him tightly and pull him closer, not wanting to lose him again.

Never wanting to lose him. Never wanting to stop kissing him.

I whimper into his strong lips, loving their feel on mine—the slight scritch of his stubble against my skin, his scent overwhelming me in the best way.

The taste of his tongue when it pushes past my lips to tangle with my own.

I've never once been kissed like this, by anyone. I honestly can't even *remember* other kisses now. Every time he tries to pull back, I just hold him even tighter, leaning into him, until I'm practically falling off the bed and into his lap while he kneels on the floor in front of me.

Eventually, we reluctantly break apart. Kir's dark eyes have ignited with a wildness I'm not sure I've ever seen in them—cold, yet heated. Explosive, yet utterly focused.

On me. *Me*.

"What… What happens now?"

I'm twenty-three years old. I do *know* what happens after two adults pull away from kissing each other on top of a bed.

But he also just told me a minute ago that *that* isn't happening right now, because I'm still in shock after what happened in Lou's office.

…He might be right, actually.

Even if I am, I don't think I would have a problem having sex with *this* man right now—or ever. The only man to have ever made me orgasm.

And that was just with *two fucking fingers*.

Imagine what he could do with…

I flush, shamelessly letting my eyes roam over him. Kir lifts a brow, smirking as if reading my thoughts.

"First, babygirl…" he growls.

Babygirl.

If anyone else called me that, it would feel infantilizing. When Kir does it, it makes me want to melt into a puddle or jump on top of him. Maybe both.

"*First*," he says, "you're going to sit right there again. Don't. Move."

Have I mentioned how outrageously hot it is when he gives me orders?

"*Okay*," I say, my body buzzing as he slowly stands. He walks across the bedroom into the ensuite bathroom, and a few seconds later, I hear water running.

Is he…taking a shower?

My question is answered a minute later when he walks out, rolling the sleeves of his dress shirt up his muscled forearms in this obscenely sexy way. He stops in front of me and reaches down to take my hand.

"Come."

Kir leads me into a beautifully elegant white tile bathroom. My eyes immediately spot the huge clawfoot tub filling with steaming hot water and sudsy bubbles.

"You can take *that* off," he growls, nodding at my clothes. For the first time since he barged into Lou's office, I suddenly realize that I'm still wearing the ridiculous schoolgirl outfit. I whip my head around to look into one of the huge floor-length mirrors, and I cringe.

Fucking hell, I've even still got the ponytails in.

I quickly take them out, shaking my hair loose before something occurs to me.

"My phone…" I frown. "I… I think I left it in the dressing room—"

"I'll have someone go get it, and anything else you may have there." He levels his gaze at me. "You're never going back to that place. Ever."

I flush, nodding. "When they go, can they also please tell the other girls that I'm okay? Maya, in particular?"

He nods. "Done." He turns and shuts off the water before glancing back at me. "For now, though, you need to take those off and get in here."

For a second, I hesitate. Obviously, undressing in front of a man isn't exactly a new concept for me. But with it being him and *just* him, it feels strangely intimate in a way I've never felt before.

The feeling only grows stronger when I realize he's making no move to look away, or leave the room. Kir leans against the vanity, ankles crossed, hands in his trouser pockets. He watches—not lecherously, not hungrily, but almost like he's wanting to make sure that nothing somehow *happens* to me when I do it.

I've never really enjoyed taking my clothes off in front of a guy.

Until now.

When I peel everything off and drop it to the floor, I flush as I stand there in front of him totally naked and exposed in this newly intimate way. My hands in two fists, I drop my arms my sides. Then I change my mind and cross them over my chest.

Kir's eyes drag over me. Again, it doesn't feel prying or icky or lecherous.

It just feels…*warm*.

He turns and nods his chin at the steaming tub. "In."

I gasp quietly as I step into the hot, sudsy water and slowly lower myself into the tub. *Fuck*, that feels good. I sit with the water up to my collarbones,

bubbles filling my field of vision as I hug my knees to my chest.

He drags a stool over and settles down on it, a little to my left and behind me.

“Tip back.”

Before I can say anything, his firm hands drop to either side of my head, his long fingers lacing over my scalp and gently pulling until I’m looking at the ceiling.

“What—”

I exhale with a halting gasp when he pours water over the back of my hair. His fingers follow, combing through my blonde strands as he pours another cup of water over me.

I hear the pop of a bottle opening, and it hits me.

He’s washing my hair.

“Are you hurt anywhere,” he growls quietly, lathering the shampoo in with firm but gentle motions.

I shake my head.

“Did that motherfucker—”

“*No*,” I choke quietly, shaking my head again. “No. He tried, but he couldn’t before you…”

Saved me. Slayed the dragon and carried me away on horseback.

Kir rinses the shampoo from my hair, then conditions it, before rinsing that out as well. When he’s done running his fingers through my clean hair, he stands beside me with a towel, which he wraps around me when I step out of the tub.

My heart races as he casually lifts me again and carries me back into the bedroom. Heat throbs in my core as he sits me on the foot of the bed and crouches down in front of me.

I slowly shake my head, staring at him, lost in those dark devil eyes.

“I—I don’t know—”

The world goes sideways and my words shatter like glass when he cups my jaw, crushing his lips to mine in a fierce, powerful kiss that melts me to my core.

I come undone, my limbs loosening, fire swelling and surging inside me as he kisses me roughly and possessively, like he’s laying claim to me.

Conquering me.

Devouring me whole.

I moan as our tongues swirl together, and when he tugs the towel open and lets it fall around me, need pulses and roars inside me.

Kir’s palms land on my legs, and my pulse jumps though the fucking roof as he slowly pushes, spreading them apart. His tongue dances with mine, teeth nibbling and biting my lips just enough to make my adrenaline spike as his hands splay around my hips, his thumbs rubbing along the creases where my thighs meet my sex.

“You’re going to be staying here now,” he murmurs, his mouth sliding from my panting lips to my jawline, trailing licks, nibbles, and kisses down my neck. I gasp, my back arching as his mouth slides over to my ear. His teeth rake over the lobe, sucking it between his lips as his deep voice burns right into my soul.

“But you owe me *nothing*,” he growls into my ear, sending a bolt of electricity directly between my legs. “And this stops whenever you—”

“*I don’t ever want you to stop,*” I choke.

A low growl rumbles in his chest as he nips at my neck.

He pushes my thighs wider apart, my breath coming in ragged, staccato bursts as he slowly trails his mouth down my neck.

“You’re *mine*, now, babygirl,” he murmurs.

Fuck me…

A whimpered mewl falls from my lips as his mouth slides over my collarbone.

“Every.”

He bites my skin, making me moan.

“Single.”

His mouth drops to the gentle slope of my breasts.

“Fucking.”

My breath hitches as his mouth hovers a quarter of an inch from my swollen, pebbled nipple, making me ache for him.

“*Part of you*.”

My eyes roll back, my mouth opening with a low whine as he wraps his lips around the aching bud and sucks. His tongue swirls around it, and I whimper loudly as my head drops back.

Holy fucking hell.

How does that feel *so* good?

He’s barely even touching me, and—

My eyes bulge, my mouth falling open in a silent scream of pleasure as Kir’s hand slips between my thighs and cups my pussy.

“*Mmmm,*” he growls into my breast as he tongues my nipple.

He strokes two fingers over me, opening me up and making me blush as I feel how fucking embarrassingly wet I am, leaking all over his fingers.

“Such a *needy* pussy,” he murmurs darkly.

I whimper when he eases those fingers against my opening, slowly starting to sink them into me as I gasp in pleasure.

“*Fuck*, babygirl,” he purrs, sliding his mouth back up my chest to my neck, until his lips are against my ear. I moan when he drives both fingers into me, curling them deep in a stroking motion that sends me reeling. “Do you

feel how your greedy little cunt strangles my fingers, little sinner?" he murmurs darkly.

I jolt when his mouth trails up my jaw again to hover a breath away from my lips.

"*I can't wait to feel this pretty pussy stretched tight around my cock.*"

Holy. Fucking. HELL.

In one explosive moment, he crushes his lips to mine, kissing me hungrily and making me cry out into his mouth as his fingers saw in and out of my pussy. The wet sound of my arousal squelching all over his fingers makes my face burn. But he keeps kissing me, swallowing my moans, dancing his tongue with mine, and I start to melt against his hand.

I whimper in frustration when he slips his fingers from my pussy. But then he suddenly shoves me back across the bed, and—

Oh God…

His big hands spread my thighs, lifting my legs and draping them over his muscled shoulders. His mouth slides up my inner thigh, biting and sucking until I'm writhing and twisting on the duvet, my breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

My vision blurs as I look down at him, kneeling between my spread thighs.

Fucking hell.

There's something outrageously hot about him hovering inches from my dripping wet pussy with raw hunger in his eyes while he's *still clothed*.

Maybe it's because the man looks like *sin* in his slacks and fitted dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up over his bulging forearms. Or that combined with the skewed power dynamic it suggests—me nude and spread open for him, and him still completely dressed.

But I don't have time to puzzle out exactly why this has me wetter and more turned on than I've ever been in my life.

Because just then, his eyes lock with mine as he lowers his mouth to my pussy.

Holy fucking FUCK.

It's like fireworks going off in every corner of my body when his tongue drags wetly up through my lips. Like I've been electrocuted. A ragged cry rips from my throat as my back arches, my thighs instinctively clamping together.

Kir grabs them and shoves them back apart, pushing his tongue into me. I whine, my back spasming again as a sensation I've literally never felt spreads like pure sin through my core.

He drags his tongue up and down my lips before he moves to my throbbing clit above. His lips wrap around the pulsing nub, and when he starts to suck, his tongue batting across it mercilessly, I come *undone*.

It's pure sin and heaven. Anarchy and chaos as my body riots with needy pleasure. He groans into me, sucking on my clit, tonguing it over and over as his fingers tease up and down my thighs, coaxing me higher. He slips one hand up again, and when he pushes two fingers back into me while he sucks and nibbles on my clit, everything starts to shake.

To blur.

To crack, rattle and tremble.

My hands fist the duvet, my entire body squirming, the muscles of my ass tightening as my back arches and my hips shamelessly grind against his mouth.

I need more.

I need all of him.

The sensation grows stronger, deeper, my core clenching up as my toes curl. My hands drop to his head, tentatively stroking his hair. When he forcibly makes me grab two fistfuls of it, I moan as my hips buck against his face.

His merciless tongue swirls over my clit as his fingers stroke this *insane* part of me just inside. My legs shake and jerk, clamping around his head.

My fingers tighten in his dark hair as the fire inside me begins to ignite.

When he looks up my body, and his dark devil eyes lock with mine, I fall completely apart at the seams.

And when I come, it's the single most explosive, consuming, life-altering thing I've ever felt.

A ragged scream rips from my throat, my entire body arching off the bed as Kir clamps his mouth to my pussy and tongues me through my first orgasm into a second one.

Then a third.

After that, it all goes blurry and melty.

I'm shaking and gasping for air when he slides up, hovering above me with one hand on the mattress next to my head and the other cupping my jaw. His mouth crashes to mine, and I whimper, kissing him eagerly, tasting my sweetness on his lips and tongue.

Then suddenly, he pulls back and scoops me up into his arms, cradling my naked, shaking body against his still-clothed one.

A lazy smile creeps over my mouth as I look up into his eyes when he starts to carry me out of the room.

"*Are you going to fuck me now*?" I whisper.

Darkness flashes in his eyes for half a second before he shakes his head.

"That isn't how this is going to work, Brooklyn."

My brows knit as he takes me down an opulent hallway.

"What do you mean?"

"This isn't transactional." He glances down at me, frowning. "You owe me nothing."

My lips twist. "But…what if I *want*—"

“You don’t want to, trust me. Not yet.” Kir’s jaw is tight, his eyes straight ahead as he carries me through the house. “You’re not ready for the way I fuck, babygirl,” he murmurs quietly.

That…shouldn’t sound as tempting as it does.

We step into a room, and he gently sets me down. When I turn, my pulse skips and my eyes open wide, my mouth falling open.

Fuck.

The guestroom or wherever I was before was gorgeous. But the vast, elegant bedroom before me is nothing short of *pure luxury*.

Huge windows, draped in white, with little Juliet balconies off them. A sitting area with a couch and two chairs. A door leading to a *stunning* bathroom, and against the far wall, an enormous, white, four-poster bed.

“What is this?” I whisper.

Kir takes a slow breath as he turns to me.

“This, babygirl, is your room.”

I blink as I stare at him. “*What*?”

“I told you: you live here now.”

I start to say something, but he cuts me off.

“It’s not up for discussion, Brooklyn,” he murmurs. “This is your house now. And this…” He turns to nod at the room. “Is your bedroom.”

I feel a brief pang and want to ask why I’m being sequestered in my own room instead of…well…sharing his.

But then, when his possessive, fiercely *protective* gaze slides over me again, I get it, and my heart melts.

He’s not keeping me at a distance.

He’s giving me space to be *me*. To feel comfortable in this house.

And whether or not he knows it, he's just given me what might be the most incredible gift of my life: my *own bed*.

Not a couch. Not a cot, or a futon. Not the back seat of Pearl.

My own bed, just for me.

I tremble when he turns to me and wraps an arm around my naked waist, his fingers splayed across my hip as he pulls me close. He reaches down to lift my chin, his eyes locking with mine.

"This house is *your house too* now," he murmurs.

I shake my head. "Kir, I—"

"And you owe me *nothing*," he growls. "Never forget that."

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KIR

I GAVE her her own space because I've been where she is.

Lost. Broken. Desperate to cling to any anchor after floating on the open sea for so long you've forgotten what solid ground feels like.

I'm also wary of pushing her too hard, too fast.

I *want her*, in every way a man can want a woman. I want to feel her submission under my palm when I take her over my knee again. I want to hear the gasp in her throat when I lace my fingers around it, her arms and legs trussed to the corners of my bed.

I want to *savor* her tight little cunt clinging to my cock when I drive into her for the first time.

But I refuse to be yet another monster in her life, another man who feeds off her vulnerability and desperation.

In the past, I may have been poor, at the mercy of systems that don't give a fuck about you, and dogged by predators who would eat you alive just to laugh at your screams.

But I'm also *acutely* aware of the massive power imbalance between us.

I'm rich, beyond powerful, and untouchable.

Brooklyn, on the other hand, is destitute. Powerless. Adrift in the world with nothing and nobody to cling to.

Until now, that is.

The fierce, almost breathtaking urge to shield her from the world, slay her demons, and lift her out of the filth and the dirt hits me again. My jaw tenses as my eyes adjust to the darkness and I lean forward in the armchair, my elbows on my thighs and my hands steepled as I slide my gaze over her sleeping form.

Yes, I gave her her own space. It doesn't mean I'm not going to sit here and keep watch, ready to fight off the nightmares if they come.

As I look at the duvet, rising and falling with her breaths, my mind flickers back to earlier.

To her squealed moans. To the slick, messy way her pussy wrapped tight around my fingers as she came from my tongue.

I can still taste her.

It's making me ludicrously hard, and seriously reconsider my stance on not pushing things with her. But no. I will *not* be another one of those men in her life. The motherfuckers from the club. Or *any* of the men who paid her to dance for them, or grind on their fucking laps. I won't be her ex—James, aka the dead man walking—who took what he wanted when he wanted it and left her with bruises.

So, no. For now, I won't be taking things further than they've gone already.

I'll touch her, yes. I'll throw her on the bed, spread her gorgeous legs and feast on her pretty pussy until I've had my fill—which, honestly, might never happen.

Anything else can wait for now, even if she's begging for it.

With all she's been through, she's not ready for my brand of fucking yet.

Not even close.

Are you going to fuck me now?

Something about the way she said that twisted a blade inside my chest. There was this note of…I don't know, *expectation* in her tone that made my

hackles rise.

I'm both furious and pained that she views sex as transactional.

That's another reason I'm holding back.

Again…*for now*.

My phone buzzes quietly in my pocket. I pull it out to see a text from Isaak.

It's here.

I cross the room to the bed, looking down at Brooklyn as she sleeps. A feeling I don't recognize, one I've never felt it before, slices through me. Then I lean down and kiss her shoulder before pulling the duvet up over it.

Outside, I exhale slowly, watching the flatbed truck unload the shitty old Accord. The thing is completely banged up, streaked with grime and scrapes, with a busted window barely taped over and bird shit covering the hood.

It's *shockingly* out of place compared to the white gravel driveway, manicured grounds, rose gardens, vast mansion, and panoramic views of Manhattan on the horizon.

A profound sadness hits me as I walk over to the car and pace around it. My jaw clenches when I peer into the windows, glancing at the back seat.

She fucking *lived* here. For more than a year.

Christ.

When I was sent to Zavolzhsky Penal Camp Eighteen as a child, that was hard. Arguably much harder than having no place to call home and living out of your car.

But, in a sense, I'd been preparing for that hardship my whole life. My father was never a wealthy man as he tried to build the fledgling Nikolayev organization into something bigger. Home was a two-bedroom shithole in an old Brutalist Soviet apartment block. I grew up on the streets, fighting sometimes for fun, but frequently for survival.

So, yes: Siberia was hell, and penal camp a nightmare. But I was ready for it.

Brooklyn, I'm guessing, was *not* ready for the life she's had the past year or more. Living out of this shitty car. Stripping. Sending all her money to a lawyer to keep her stepfather out of prison, even if the idiot is the reason she went into foster care in the first place. Even worse, she's a young, attractive woman.

And she's had no allies throughout this ordeal. No friends she could truly confide in or lean on.

In every scenario, even Siberia, I had things better than her. And I fucking hate how unfair that is, and how cruelly life has treated her.

Isaak clears his throat behind me, pulling my attention away from the miserable little Honda. He's got one of "those" looks on his face, weighing his duty to protect me and aid me in decisions against his desire to speak freely.

I've told him for years that there are no restrictions there. But Isaak's old-school, and takes the whole me "being his boss" thing to the level of King.

"Just say it," I sigh.

He frowns, and I roll my eyes.

"It was easier to talk to you when you smoked, you know."

He cracks a grin, lifting a shoulder. "Apparently, cigarettes are bad for you."

"Imagine that."

Isaak shrugs. "It feels good not to be addicted to them anymore. I wanted to get healthier for…well, me."

I arch a brow. "And how *is* Kai."

I will never, ever tire of watching my number two *blush*.

It's like watching the bull in the china shop *sit down and make tea* instead of…doing what you assume he's going to.

“Kai is good.” He cocks a brow. “And *you*?”

“Care to get specific?” I grunt.

Isaak chuckles. “Not really.” He turns to eye the car, then glances up at the house. “But I do have to ask…”

“Anything.”

He peers at me. “You sure you know what you’re doing?”

“I can handle it,” I growl.

He clears his threat. “She’s a very talented dancer.”

“Indeed.”

“So talented that I hear she's trying to get into that fancy ballet company in Moscow, where your friend's the head honcho.”

My eyes narrow. “Where’s the headline here.”

His brows puzzle.

“The *point*, Isaak.”

He spreads his hands. “I was under the impression that this fancy ballet only has *one* opening. And that the terms of your agreement with Dimitri include—”

“I’m well aware of what my arrangement with Dimitri entails,” I growl.

Isaak nods and levels a look at me. “I guess I was wondering what happens when the girl you’re bending over backward for asks you about her dream of dancing in Moscow, and your friend who could make that happen, and you have to decide what to do.”

I scowl, my teeth gritting. “The decision's already been made. Inessa goes to Moscow. That's final.”

Isaak nods. “Okay, then.” Then he wisely changes the subject and points to the Honda. “What do you want to do about this? It’s leaking oil all over the gravel.”

“You've gotten extremely bougie, Isaak.”

Part of me wanted to have the car destroyed when Isaak’s people found it. But then I put myself in her shoes and reconsidered.

Shit-box or not, this was her *home* for a year. It was the roof over her head. I’ll let her decide what happens to it, and then I’ll get to work fixing the rest of her.

I moved out of my darkness. She can too.

I’ll *drag* her out of it, if necessary.

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24

BROOKLYN

WAKING up the next morning feels like entering a new dimension. Or maybe I haven't woken up at all, and I'm still dreaming.

This *cannot* be real.

Soft sunlight filters through the gauzy white curtains. One of the tall windows is slightly open, and the greenery in a vase of white hydrangeas sitting on a gorgeous glass and copper table close by moves softly in the breeze.

The whole room smells floral and so *clean*.

My eyes drink in the elegant, paneled walls with whimsical framed black and white photos of New York, the gorgeous furniture.

And the bed…

Heaven.

It's massive, king-sized, with a down mattress, ridiculously soft sheets, and a duvet that I could literally wrap myself in forever. The pillows are firm enough to cradle but soft enough to coax you into relaxation. Translucent white linen drapes down from the top of the four-poster bed, making me feel like a princes waking from her beauty sleep.

I grin to myself.

How is this real?

Just as I’m about to get out of bed, I freeze.

I went to bed naked last night. Which means…

I slip to the edge of the bed and push aside the curtains, and my heart leaps.

Laid out on the couch is a *gorgeous* summery outfit: a simple but beautiful white knee-length sundress, a lightweight, cropped white cardigan, strappy sandals, and…

Oh my.

A matching set of *super* elegant lacy white bra and thong panties.

As I’m staring at the outfit, I realize there’s more. On one of the sitting chairs across from the couch is the gorgeous Hermes bag that Kir gave me before.

Wait. That’s impossible. That was in my car the night I ran from James, and it was *definitely* part of the stuff that got looted before I could get back to Pearl.

Then it hits me: it’s not the same bag, he just got me *another one*.

I'm half expecting to see what I do when I open it, but it still hits me hard.

It’s all here again. Brand new, and mine.

The Nikolay Grishko warm up sets. The Luckyleo leotards. The Repetto slippers. *Another* note mentioning the two-hundred pre-ordered pointe shoes from Freed of London.

My heart lurches as I bring a hand to my mouth.

How the hell is this reality?

I take a quick shower in the ensuite bathroom, then change into the clothes Kir’s laid out for me. Which feels a little strange for a second, like I’m a doll he’s dressing up.

But that quickly goes away when I slip on some of the most expensive, beautiful clothes I’ve ever even seen. I look at my reflection in the mirror and tingle. I barely recognize myself.

With a smile on my face, I step out of the gorgeous bedroom. I have no idea where I should be looking for Kir in the vast mansion, or what I'm supposed to do next. But then the smell of coffee fills my nostrils, and I follow the scent.

As I go down the hall, I catch sight of something outside in the driveway as I pass a window. Before I know what I'm doing, I race through the house until I find a door, and tumble outside.

There, in all her cracked, dented, dirty glory, is *Pearl*. A huge smile spreads over my face as I run over to the old girl, running my hand over the front fender. A mix of happiness and darkness swirls within me as I slowly walk around the car.

Happiness, because somewhere in the back of my mind I remembered that today was a street-sweeping day where I'd parked her. Which would have meant her getting towed if she was still there when the sweeper came through.

After Kir told me "you live here now", I'd sort of resigned myself to the fact that Pearl was lost forever and felt a pang.

That's where I *lived*. For a *year*.

It feels like I spent the entire time I was doing that trying to normalize it in order to survive it. But after one night in Kir's house, that normalization has broken apart.

How the fuck did I ever make it?

I smile a melancholy, wry smile, running a hand over Pearl's side lovingly before I turn and head back into the house. The invigorating smell of coffee finally leads me into an enormous kitchen, and I stop suddenly when I see Kir already there—leaning against the kitchen counter in a *sinfully* well-fitted dark suit, no tie, reading the *New York Times* as he sips his coffee.

My core clenches when I zero in on his dark-framed reading glasses.

Like…are you fucking kidding me? It's ludicrous: this man just keeps getting more attractive every time I see him. And the fact that he's reading a

physical paper instead of a phone or a tablet? It gives him this even more distinguished refinement that tingles through me.

I clear my throat and he looks up, his brows lifting and the corners of his lips curling upwards as he sweeps his gaze boldly over me.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs, setting down his paper and coffee.

“It’s...” I shake my head, my face burning. “*Thank you*.”

He nods. “My people are going out today. Your closet will be full by tonight.”

I blink quickly. “My…closet?”

He cocks a brow. “The walk-in changing room. Off your bedroom. My people have your sizes, and the personal shopper I use is quite good.”

A walk-in changing room.

I’ve spent the last year with a duffel bag for a closet, which I kept in Pearl's trunk.

But then, something tugs at me. Namely, my lifelong issues with taking handouts.

“I…thank you,” I say quietly. “But you really don’t have to—”

“I’m choosing to.”

I swallow as my eyes drag up to his. “I don’t have the money to pay you ba—”

“You’re familiar with the concept of a gift, yes?”

My lips twist. “A place to stay is one thing. But a closet full of clothes—”

“I’m going to make this simple,” Kir says with a sigh. “I’m buying you clothes. You can choose not to wear them, but I’m still going to be buying them, and putting them in your closet. I’m also going to be covering any and all of the rest of your expenses, including your stepfather’s legal necessities.”

I blink, my pulse skipping as I stare at him.

"*Kir—*"

"If you were under the impression that this was a discussion or a debate, allow me to redress that assumption."

I can feel my cheeks simmering as my teeth roll my lips. But it's also *very* clear that he's right: this isn't a debate at all. It's just what's happening.

And maybe you should just be okay with that, for once?

Kir's eyes stay locked on mine. "How did you sleep?"

"Like a rock. I swear I just passed out last night."

He smiles, a hint of smug devilishness in his eyes. "Imagine that."

I blush fiercely. "I slept amazingly, though." I shake my head. "A real bed. Who would've thought?"

He smiles, and *goddammit*, it's hot.

And I'm feeling freer than I have in a long, long time.

Something sparks inside me, my heart beating faster as heat throbs in my core. I slowly walk toward where he's leaning against the counter, my lip catching between my teeth as I slink right up to him.

Kir growls quietly and slides one of his hands over my hip.

"I slept well enough," I say quietly, taking a nervous breath. "But I was lonely…"

My hands go to his chest, rubbing the pulse-heatingly hard muscles beneath his dress shirt, then his rippling six-pack.

My hand pushes lower, drifting down to his belt buckle.

"*Very* lonely—"

He abruptly takes my hand and yanks it away. Instantly, mortification floods through me.

Did I read this wrong? I mean the man pinned me to the bed last night and went down on me, giving me the biggest—and second real—orgasm of my life.

He told me I lived here now. That this house was my house. So—

Then something else from last night slides into my thoughts.

“You’re not ready for the way I fuck, babygirl.”

Before I can ponder that further, his big hands slide over my waist. His fingers lace around me, and I gasp when he lifts me into the air like I weigh nothing at all. He sets me down on the counter next to him and moves between my knees, spreading my thighs either side of his hips.

Without a word, he lifts his coffee mug to my mouth, the ceramic brushing my lips.

“*Open*,” he says firmly.

I shiver as I obey, parting my lips. Without spilling a drop, he tilts the mug, letting me drink from it. For some reason, it's one of the most sensual, intimate things I’ve ever experienced.

I take a second sip of the warm coffee with a touch of milk before he pulls the mug away and sets it aside. His arms go to either side of me, boxing me in as I perch on the edge of the counter, my legs still spread around him.

“Why won’t you let me touch you?” I ask.

Kir’s head tips to the side. Slowly, he lowers his face toward me. My breath catches as he brushes butterfly kisses down the line of my jaw, making me tremble before his mouth stops and hovers by my ear.

“Because,” he purrs, “right now, *I’m* touching *you*.”

His hands move to my legs, and he slowly starts to push up the hem of my sundress, higher and higher. When I glance down, I flush when I realize the lacy white panties are now completely in view.

Without a word, Kir slowly lowers himself between my legs. I bite back a whimper when his veined hands slide up and his fingers hook into the

waistband of the panties. He slowly draws them down my thighs, then my calves. Finally, they fall from one foot, catching on the other.

A whimper comes from my throat as he spreads my thighs wide, completely opening me to his piercing, dark gaze.

“Stay like this,” he commands in a low, authoritative tone before leaning in between them.

I gasp as I feel his breath tease over my thighs, then over the slickness I can feel coating my pussy.

Without warning, his tongue makes contact, and my whole world dissolves.

“*Oh…*” I whisper, the sound coming out in a rush as he drags his tongue all the way up my lips. He groans, pushing his tongue into me, and I moan as I feel it snake deep between my lips.

With a low rumble from his chest, his hands still on my thighs, Kir drags his tongue up and down my slit. My eyes bulge when I feel the teasing tip of it barely brush my ass, then move all the way up again until it swirls over my throbbing clit.

Sweet. Fucking. God.

Fireworks detonate through my body as I whine. My back arches, my brow caving as I look down between my legs at the gorgeous *god* of a man shoving my thighs all the way apart and *feasting* on my pussy.

With a low growl, he fastens his mouth over my clit, sucking hard and letting his tongue swirl around the throbbing bundle of nerves. I cry out sharply, panting as he strokes and sucks and nibbles, until my whole body is shaking.

He keeps up the same insane, soul-melting pace, his tongue batting back and forth across my aching clit, his groans rumbling through my core. My back arcs like a bow, my head dropping back and my hips shamelessly pushing against his mouth like they have a mind of their own.

The pressure builds, the tremors and little explosions in my body growing wilder until suddenly, my spine snaps rigid and my face collapses in pure,

blissful pleasure.

“*Yes…*” I gasp, choking on my moans. “*I'm—*”

With a violent wrench of my body, the orgasm explodes through me, twisting me as I scream out pure pleasure. My hips grind up against his face, his tongue dancing over my clit as I come over and over against his mouth.

I’m still shaking when Kir slowly rises up between my legs. He fists the back of my hair, and I whimper when his mouth crushes to mine. I lose myself, kissing him madly, tasting myself on his tongue.

His hand slips between my legs and I gasp when he sinks two fingers deep into me. I moan when he curls them up against that spot inside, his palm grinding against my still-throbbing clit as he devours my lips.

He starts to stroke his fingers quickly in and out of me, his palm rubbing over my clit with every thrust of his fingers. I cry out, already so keyed up that it feels like I’m going to explode. The wet sounds of him finger-fucking my dripping wet pussy fill the kitchen as he bites down on my bottom lip, drawing it back until it slips from his teeth with a pop.

His mouth drops to my neck, sucking and licking the tenderest spots with his tongue before he drags his mouth to my ear.

“Your pussy is officially my new favorite breakfast, babygirl,” he growls quietly. “But I don’t think this greedy little cunt is ready for me to stop paying attention to it, is it.”

I shake my head violently as I struggle to breathe.

“*No*…!” I gasp.

“No *what*,” he growls.

Oh, shit.

“*No sir*,” I moan as his thick fingers ram into me, wringing more pleasure from my body.

“You want to come for me, don’t you.”

“*Yes sir*!” I sob, clinging to his arms for dear life, my head lolling back as he growls into my ear.

“This pretty pussy is going to make a fucking *mess* all over my fingers, isn't that right, babygirl.”

I cry out in pleasure, my reality blurring and my body tensing as the pressure builds to a level I can’t contain anymore.

“Make a mess,” he snarls into my ear. “And fucking come for me like a good girl *right now*.”

“*Yes SIR!”*

I scream as my body jolts and wrenches violently, twisting and spasming as the orgasm detonates through me. His mouth crushes mine, kissing me brutally and swallowing my moans as I come against his hand over and over.

My body is still shaking, my brain still completely unable to form words or even thoughts as he slowly pulls away. He slips his fingers from between my legs and I shiver when he deftly reaches down, grabs the panties hanging off one ankle, and gently pulls them up, lifting my ass to get them up into place and smoothing my dress back down over my knees.

Kir gently cups my jaw, his dark eyes blazing as he leans down and kisses me deeply. Then he pulls away, his eyes locked with mine.

“I need to take a phone call.”

I blink. “Oh…okay.”

Oh, okay? Fucking *really,* self*?*

He rolls his shoulders and straightens his suit jacket. Then, without any warning, he leans in and kisses me softly before letting his lips trail over my cheek to my ear.

“*Good girl*.”

He leaves me with his mug of coffee, still sitting on the kitchen counter, my pulse still through the roof and my entire core shaking.

How is this real?

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KIR

I CAN STILL TASTE her on my tongue. Still feel the way her body bucked against my mouth, still hear her moans echoing in my ears.

I deliberately avoid washing my hands or taking another sip of anything. Now, I sit in my study and wait for Dimitri's call, knowing whatever he wants to talk about, he'll do it with me relishing the taste of Brooklyn's pussy on my lips.

I've also just gotten off the phone with her stepfather's lawyer, Diego Padilla, letting him know that I'll be taking over any and all legal expenses.

My phone rings at the scheduled time. It's a name I don't recognize, but *nobody* but people I know have this number, so I answer with a scowl.

"Yes."

"Mr. Nikolayev," a Russian-accented man's voice says brusquely. "My name is Andrei. I'm Mr. Moskovic's second."

I cock a brow. "Will Dimitri himself be joining us?"

"I'm afraid not."

My jaw clenches, thinking about the superhuman strength it took to pull away from Brooklyn's lovely cunt to take this fucking phone call.

I saw the confusion in her eyes when I pulled her hand away before she could touch my cock. Obviously, it's not that I don't want her.

Again, *she's just not ready for me*.

For my kind of intimacy. For my style of fucking, involving restraints, blindfolds, gags…

Punishment.

Maybe she *thinks* she is. But after everything she's been through, I'm erring on the side of caution.

Andrei clears his throat. "I sincerely apologize, Mr. Nikolayev. Mr. Moskovic has unfortunately been pulled into some unexpected, but important business."

My mouth sours. "More important than our discussion?" I growl. "Which I blocked off time from my busy morning schedule to take?"

Okay, my busy morning schedule involved devouring Brooklyn's pussy and weighing if she's ready to swallow my cock yet.

But *still*.

"I really do apologize, Mr. Nikolayev. It's not more *important*, but more… pressing." Andrei sighs. "One off Mr. Moskovic's money laundering businesses was hit hard last night."

"Oh. How unfortunate."

I know he means The Mirage.

"Yes. Someone roughed up the manager of the place, who's his primary cleaner. Mr. Moskovic is quite understandably angered."

That cleaner is a predatory piece of human shit.

"Dimitri *is* aware, though, that when our deal goes through, whatever businesses he has here in New York will need to be closed?"

"Of course," Andrei says quickly. "I think given your deal will be completed soon, he's been trying to push through as much cleaning as possible."

"I see," I growl. "And what does Dimitri plan to do about the attack?"

Andrei clears his throat. “With our operations pulling out of the city shortly, I believe Mr. Moskovic might be looking for one last ‘adventure’ here, if you will.”

I scowl. “Meaning?”

“I believe he’s hoping to make an example out of whoever’s responsible.”

That might complicate things.

“Any leads?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Andrei grunts. “But he’s looking into it.”

“I see.”

Movement through the office windows pulls my attention to Brooklyn’s old car, sitting in the driveway.

…And to Brooklyn pulling something ratty-looking out of the trunk and shaking the dust off it.

“My sympathies to Dimitri, Andrei,” I growl. “But I’m afraid I need to—”

“One last thing, Mr. Nikolayev,” Andrei says. “Mr. Moskovic wanted me to touch base on how the other part of your arrangement is going. Have you contacted Ivan Yelchin yet concerning Inessa’s acceptance into the company?”

My jaw tightens as my eyes focus on Brooklyn outside. Fuck, she looks so beautiful. So *happy* right now, like there’s a weight off her shoulders.

“Top of my list,” I growl to Andrei.

“Excellent,” he says. “I appreciate your time this morning, Mr. Nikolayev.”

I’m already halfway out the back door when I hang up, slipping the phone into my pocket.

“I thought you might have a sentimental attachment to it.”

She smiles as she turns to me. “*Thank you*,” she beams. “Really. I know Pearl is a wreck, but—”

“Pearl?”

She grins and jerks a thumb at the old Accord. “The car.”

Looks like I was spot on with the sentiment attachment idea.

Then my brow furrows as I look at the old dance bag in her hands.

“What are you doing?”

“I have rehearsals,” she shrugs.

“You also have a brand-new Hermes bag upstairs in your room.”

Brooklyn’s lip catches between her teeth as she glances down and then back up at me. “It’s *gorgeous*…”

“But?”

She smiles wryly. “What am I supposed to say when my friends ask how I afforded a bag that costs a couple thousand dollars?”

My brow furrows. “The truth, maybe.”

Her face twists. “I…” She looks down.

“What is it,” I ask, stepping closer and lifting her face with a fingertip under her chin. *Christ*, it takes everything I've got not to kiss this woman every fucking time I touch her.

“This is going to sound terrible,” she says quietly. “And unappreciative, and like I'm such a bitch—”

“You’re wondering what they’ll say if you tell them you’re living with me, accepting my gifts.”

She nods slowly.

“I'm sorry, that sounds awful—”

“No, it sounds like reality,” I growl.

She’s right, and I’m pissed at myself that I didn’t even consider that angle.

“It’s just…” She sighs helplessly. “It'll look like I’m screwing the owner of the ballet for gifts, maybe special treatment…”

I arch a brow. “But you’re *not* screwing the owner of the ballet.”

“I’m apparently not even allowed to *touch* him,” she snaps, a clear edge in her tone that I don’t miss.

“I should have thought of that,” I frown. “The optics, I mean.”

She smiles sadly. “It’s a *gorgeous* bag. I just…”

“Can’t bring it to work without people asking questions.”

She nods.

“Well, you’re bringing some of the things,” I murmur with a glint of satisfaction.

She *has to* wear a few of the gifts I got her. She doesn’t have a choice.

I checked her car last night, which is how I realized the Hermes bag and everything I’d bought for her were gone. Part of me wondered if she’d sold them, but the state of the rest of her wardrobe painted the picture: she was robbed.

All the more reason I’m keeping her here, safe with me.

But that also means she doesn’t really *have* anything to wear to rehearsal today other than the dance gear I bought her.

Good. I want her in the finery and elegance I've chosen to drape her in.

When she’s packed up for work, Brooklyn insists on taking the subway. Obviously, that isn’t going to happen. One of my men will drive her. But when I tell her that, she argues with me in a way that makes me want to take her over my knee and then fuck her while she's tied to my desk.

I restrain myself on that last part. But I *do* spank her ass while she's bent over my lap before I finger her greedy pussy into another orgasm.

In the end, I tell her I’ve called her an Uber Black, which I promise will drop her off a few blocks from the Mercury Theater so no one asks any

awkward questions.

In reality, the Range Rover that drives her into the city is driven by one of my men, *pretending* to be an Uber.

It's also worth mentioning that the upgraded new phone I gave her to use instead of the shitty, cracked one she had before has a tracking chip in it.

Sorry-not-sorry. I won't apologize for my protective feelings for this woman.

When she's gone, I smile widely as I take a seat at my desk and click on the email I've purposefully delayed opening.

I had a private detective hunt down this fucking James shithead . Now comes the fun part: finding out who he is, dragging him into a hole somewhere, and inflicting every single thing he did to her on *him* before I cut his throat.

When I open the email, though, my whole mood shifts.

Shit.

Son of a fucking BITCH.

James Lucareli started today as a dead man walking. But that sentence has just been put on hold. Apparently James is the nephew of *Giovani* Lucareli.

AKA, the president of the longshoremen's union.

AKA, the man who facilitates *all* my imports and exports through New York harbor.

It doesn't change the fact that James is a dead man. He *will* be answering for what he did to Brooklyn. His death sentence has just been…*delayed*, while I find a tactful way of telling Giovani I'm going to be dismembering his nephew.

No one fucks with what's mine.

No one.

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BROOKLYN

"YOU NEED ICE ON THAT."

I pull my gaze from the gorgeous painting leaning against the wall—an explosion of heavy blacks and bright pinks—to glance at Dove.

Enigmatic and a little standoffish at times as she can be, it turns out Dove is pretty awesome. So when she invited me over to her carriage house/art studio again today after rehearsal, I gladly said yes.

It's been two days since I moved into Kir's house, and I'm still waiting to wake up in the back seat of Pearl and realize it's all been a dream.

I begin every morning in that gorgeous new room, in the bed I can scarcely bear to leave. Then I have my morning coffee with Kir—which always includes him putting me on the kitchen counter, spreading my legs, and going down on me until I'm screaming.

I go to rehearsal—though by now I've figured out that the guys taking me to the Mercury in the black SUVs are definitely Kir's men, not Uber drivers.

Uber drivers don't usually have sidearms and Bratva tattoos.

Then, I come home to dinner with him, which *also* involves him putting his mouth on me and making me writhe and scream as he devours me.

Actually, the last couple of days could almost entirely be measured in "orgasms per hour" or "OPH", because most of what I've been doing is coming on his tongue and fingers.

But he mentioned running late tonight for some work thing, which is why I'm over at Dove's instead of spread out on Kir's desk with his mouth between my thighs, calling me a good girl as he makes me scream.

Dove nods at my right ankle. "How'd you do that?"

I shrug. "Just a wonky landing earlier."

She frowns. "Still, you should put some ice on it, maybe stay off it for the night. You've been favoring it since we left the theater."

I wince. "It does hurt a little. You have a couple of ibuprofens I could grab?"

Dove stiffens for a second, then shakes her head. "I'm out, sorry."

"Crap. Tylenol? Motrin?"

She shakes her head again. "Nada. Sorry."

"No problem." I shrug, then I laugh. "How about a drink? That might help."

She gives me a strange smile. "Sorry again. I don't do alcohol."

"It's fine," I smile, gently rotating my ankle to work the stiffness out. "Hey, how's your show going?" I frown. "I'm an asshole, I haven't gone to see it yet."

"You don't know where the show *is*."

"That's because you haven't told me!"

She laughs. "I will. *Maybe*…" She lifts a shoulder. "I dunno, I'm still trying to decide if I want to share it with anyone who actually knows me."

I stare at her in amazement, then slowly turn to look at the gorgeous art all over the carriage house.

"Why the hell *not*?"

Her brow puzzles. "I don't know." She shrugs again and looks down. "It feels vulnerable to show this side of me to friends."

"I get that."

She eyes me curiously. “Why do you want to dance for the *Imperiya Korona*?”

“Because it’s one of the best companies in the world.”

“So is the Zakharova,” she says with a pointed look.

I shake my head. “I guess part of it is also looking to get out of New York, maybe? I mean, I love it here…” I frown. “But I guess I also hate it? I don’t know, it’s complicated. I think I just want something new.”

Dove nods. “And… Why haven’t *you* told any of your friends that you’re hoping to move to Moscow?”

She gives me a *gotcha* look, and I grin.

Fuck. Walked right into that one.

“Touché,” I sigh as she laughs.

The door to the carriage house bangs open, startling us both. I turn in surprise when a woman who looks maybe thirty walks in, dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, dressed to *kill*.

She’s in Dolce *everything*, except for the red-soled Louboutin shoes. She’s also carrying what I at first think is a stuffed animal before the little dog shoots me a hate stare and yaps at me.

Dove exhales tightly, turning to glare at the woman as she click-clacks in.

“You could *knock*,” she mutters coldly.

The woman ignores her, pausing to give me a superior look.

“And you are…?”

I turn to glance at Dove, who sighs heavily.

“Brooklyn, this is my evil cunt of a stepmother, Medusa. Medusa, this is my friend, Brooklyn.”

The woman rolls her eyes at Dove before she turns her attention back to me. “*Friend*? From where?”

“From ballet?” I offer. “I dance with Dove at—”

“The *theater*,” she sighs dramatically. “Of *course*, of course.”

Her demeanor shifts. I guess I’ve somehow proven my worthiness. She sticks out a dainty hand, still clutching the little fluffball in the other one.

“Felicity Marchetti,” she drawls like we’re at a country club. “And this little lovey here”…she boops the mean-looking dog on the nose with a manicured finger…“is Chanel.” She looks back up at me. “As in Coco.”

I smile politely. “Of course.”

“Felicity, take your devil spawn and get the fuck—”

“*So rude.*” Felicity cuts Dove off with a snap—like a literal finger snap—in her face, before turning back to me. “I apologize for my daughter’s poor manners.”

The “daughter” part is weird. Dove literally just introduced her as her stepmother, and also Felicity looks all of maybe five years older than Dove.

“*Step*daughter magically turns into *daughter* whenever she’s recently had more work done,” Dove smirks. “She wants you to say ‘oh, you're far too young to be her mother!’ But the real reason you can tell we're not related is, obviously, my lack of horns, forked tail, and my inability to turn men to stone with a glance.”

Felicity turns to level a withering look at Dove. “Hon, the *real* reason it’s clear I’m not your mother is that *I* would have had the sense to abort you.”

Jesus Christ.

Dove glares daggers at her stepmother as the woman turns back to me.

“Brooklyn, was it?”

I nod. “Brooklyn Ellis.”

“*Oh*!” She brightens a little. “Of the Upper East Side Ellises?”

“Afraid not.”

Her face falls again. “I see.”

“And *I* see you’re still leaving brimstone footprints on my floor, so get the fuck *out*,” Dove snaps.

Felicity twists her face into a fake, overly-concerned look. “Aww, Dovey. Are we not feeling well today?” She smiles viciously, a wicked glint in her eye. “You’re not relapsing, are—”

“*FUCK. YOU.*”

The sheer ferocity of Dove’s voice startles even me, but it almost topples her stepmother and the “dog” right over. Felicity recovers, then sniffs primly.

“Well, *a pleasure* to meet you, Brooklyn. If you have *any* brains at all, you’ll stay away from this”—she jabs a finger at Dove—“fucking *train wreck*.”

Without another word, she spins and clip-clops out the door, slamming it shut behind her.

Dove exhales slowly, turning away and shoving her fingers through her silvery pink hair.

“You okay?” I ask softly.

She nods, still facing away as she brushes perhaps a tear from her eye.

“Yeah,” she mutters. “Fine.” She turns back to me, sighing. “Sorry about that that. She’s…well, *obviously* the Queen of Hell, and I don’t mean that as a compliment.” Dove's brows pinch. “She just says stupid shit all the time, accuses me of…whatever she’s seen on the news.” She rolls her eyes. “My family is…” She shakes her head again, looking away. “*Insane*. Sorry.”

I shake my head. “No apology necessary. I get insane families, trust me.” I bark a cold laugh. “My dad left before I was born, my mom OD-ed when I was a kid, and my stepfather, who I’m currently trying to keep out of prison, lost custody of me when I was nine, which is how I wound up in foster care.”

Dove smiles wryly. “I'm sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks, but there's no need.” I reach out and put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m just saying, I get families who don’t do what they're supposed to for you.”

She nods before suddenly jerking her head up. “Hey,” she grins, “wanna throw paint balloons at a canvas with me? It’s super fun, and *great* for aggression.”

My lips pull into a smile. “*Definitely*.”

* * *

KIR ISN’T BACK YET when I get home. I’m a bit fidgety, and still sulking a little about the step I was practicing earlier that led to the pain in my ankle.

Dove’s right: I should be icing and resting it. But I do the opposite.

In the ballroom of Kir’s house—yes, the literal fucking *ballroom*—I put on some dancewear and pointe shoes and get to work.

I grit my teeth as my ankle screams at me. But I push on, forcing myself to repeat the sequence until I know there’s no way I’ll mess it up ever again.

“You should be resting that ankle.”

I gasp, whipping around to see Kir standing in the doorway. He’s in his usual armor—dark suit, white dress shirt, no tie—and the black pools of his eyes bore into me from across the room.

“I didn’t even hear you come in,” I breathe.

He arches a brow, a smile teasing his mouth. “I’ve been watching for a while,” he says. “That was very good.”

I won’t lie, I *love* the swell of pride in my chest that accompanies his praise.

“All the same…” He furrows his brow, lifting a hand to point. “You need to rest that ankle. Whatever you've done to it, you’re clearly favoring it.”

I shake my head. “It’s fine. And I need to keep going. The callback for the *Imperiya Korona* is in—”

“I’m *aware*,” he growls. “You still need to listen to your body.”

“I am,” I toss back, still panting a little from exertion. “And it says I’m fine.”

Kir’s dark eyes narrow. “Sit and rest, Brooklyn.”

“I’m *okay*,” I say, rotating my ankle with a grimace. “I’m going to keep—”

“It wasn’t a suggestion,” he growls.

“And I don’t take *orders* from you,” I say testily.

Kir’s eyes glint, his jaw rippling as he clenches it. An eager thrill tingles through me. But suddenly, without a word, he turns and marches from the room.

“So *there*,” I mutter at his retreating back, feeling smug.

I go back to the routine, pushing myself again to perfect the sequence that I'm having trouble with, which is also the part that makes my ankle scream.

Suddenly, I hear footsteps. I shriek when Kir surges into me, grabs me around the waist, picks me up as I flail, and tosses me over his shoulder.

“Let *go* of me!!” I scream, kicking and thrashing as he marches out of the ballroom. It’s like trying to fight a brick wall. All I can do is yell and swear at him as he storms through my bedroom and into the adjoining bathroom.

He unties the pointe shoes and yanks them of my feet.

“Get the *fuck* off of—”

I gasp as he whips me off his shoulder and suddenly plunges me into the fucking *freezing* cold ice water.

I screech, almost levitating as I try to get out of the icy water. But Kir’s grip is relentless, his dark eyes locked with mine as he easily keeps my squirming, thrashing body in the water.

“Does it feel like a sprain?”

“It feels like I just fell off the fucking *Titanic*,” I spit.

Kir glares. “Your *ankle*, Brooklyn,” he grunts. “Does it feel like a torn ligament?”

“I’m *fine*,” I mutter petulantly.

“You’re reckless,” he hisses back. “You’re trying to push past pain because you think it gets you a badge of honor. All it’s going to get you is a ruined career.”

“I don’t have the luxury of slowing down,” I seethe.

“Tonight, you *do*,” he growls back.

I try to get out again, but his grip is unyielding, and eventually I stop fighting.

I exhale, glowering, as I slump back in the icy tub. Which, though I hate to admit it and never would to his face, *is* helping my ankle a lot.

“*This is what care looks like*,” Kir says quietly. “Learn to recognize it.”

He makes me sit there another five minutes, until my entire body is numb from the ice water.

But goddammit, my ankle feels *way* better.

I don’t resist when Kir lifts me out of the water and carries me back to the bedroom. Nor do I fight when he deftly undresses me before sitting me on the edge of the bed and wrapping a tensor bandage around my ankle.

When he suddenly shoves me back, sending me sprawling across the bed, my pulse thunders as I stare at him.

“*What are you—*”

“Life is a series of gives and takes, Brooklyn,” he growls, shrugging off his jacket. “If you sometimes suffer the bad, you can more readily savor the good.”

He starts to roll his shirt sleeves up to the elbows.

“You suffered the bad—that would be the unpleasantness of the ice bath.”

I glare at him from the bed. “*Unpleasantness*?” I mutter.

“And now,” he continues, “you can savor the good.”

I bite my lip. “Which is?”

I whimper when he suddenly grabs my thighs, yanks me to the edge of the bed, and spreads my legs, taking care not to touch my injured ankle.

“Me warming your pussy up with my tongue.”

Oh.

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BROOKLYN

I STEP out of the dressing room, skittering to a halt as a muscled, tattooed arm shoots out and blocks my path.

I let my gaze up run over the spiraling ink, broad shoulders, absurdly beautifully proportioned neck and head, and grin.

“Can I help you, Val?”

My friend winks at me. “Depends.”

“On?”

“On if you're in a sharing mood.”

My brow furrows. “You were just in the same rehearsal I was in, right? So maybe you can see why I don’t really have the energy for riddles right now?”

He chuckles. “Fair. I’ll skip the tiptoeing.” He looks pointedly at me. “Who’s the new guy?”

I almost choke on my tongue.

“*What*?” I squeak, probably cementing Val’s theory firmly into place.

“Who are you fucking. I can tell it’s someone fun, and I want details.”

I frown at him. “I am not *fucking* anyone.”

…Which is technically true.

That still hasn’t happened. He’s gone down on me literally three times a day for the last week, occasionally mixing it up by pinning me to the wall or over the nearest random piece of furniture and fingering me into oblivion. He also keeps me guessing with the odd spanking over his knee, mostly when I’m being a brat.

But he still won’t let me touch him.

Infuriatingly, he keeps claiming that I’m “not ready” for that with him. That his “brand” of sex is too rough, too…whatever…for me.

On one hand, it’s not like I’m *mad* that the freaking god of a man I’m living with has a thing for making me come on his tongue. And I know he’s only holding back because of what I’ve told him I’ve been through, and from what he’s seen.

But it's making me regret telling him anything at all about James or Lou, or about the shit I went through in foster care.

I *know* it’s because he doesn’t want to hurt me, but I feel it should be up to me to decide if what he’s into or the way he fucks is “too much”, not be *told* that it is. But how do I say that to someone as larger than life, and powerful, and seemingly *immortal* as Kir?

“You totally are,” Val sighs.

I could keep fighting him on the technicalities of this. But I’m exhausted after rehearsal, so I let it slide.

“Fine,” I shrug. “Yeah, I’m…seeing someone.”

He grins wickedly. “*And*…he—or she…?”

I roll my eyes. “He. Still straight, buddy.”

He sighs happily. “My favorite foreplay line, from a guy.”

I snort. “Okay, I’ll bite. How did you guess?”

He gives me a *look*. “The floaty way you’ve been swishing your hips around all week like you’re still imagining the dick you were riding before

rehearsal might have something to do with it."

My face burns. "I have *not* been doing that."

"Agree to disagree. But as well…" He lets his eyes slide over me before leaning close. "Look, I know how you are about…you know…" He shrugs. "C'mon, like I don't feel it too? Most of our friends here at work grew up heirs and heiresses to mafia kingdoms with Amex Black Cards and personal bodyguards. You and I fought off sex pests in the foster system." He gives me a hard look. "Dude, I *know* you have to be careful with money—"

I start to protest, but Val puts his hands on my shoulders.

"No shame. I do, too. Even if Vaughn is apparently some sort of professional Bond villain now."

I smirk. "How *are* things going with reconnecting?"

Val rolls his eyes. "Up and down. I mean, it's cool to have family for the first time. It's just a little weird when he turns out to be the head of an international crime syndicate." He shakes his head, smirking. "Get this: we had dinner the other night—motherfucker booked out *all* of Eleven Madison. Like, the whole fucking restaurant."

I whistle. "Holy shit."

"Oh, it gets better," Val mutters. "At one point between course eleven million and course twelve-million-and-seven—"

I giggle.

"This fucking guy's *henchmen* show up, whisper in his ear—"

"Wait, what do they call him again?" I grin.

Val rolls his eyes. "*The Marquis*. It's the title they give to whoever's head of the Obsidian Syndicate."

"How dramatic."

Val snorts. "Right? And *I'm* the one who dances ballet and fucks men. But I digress. Anyway, Vaughn just ups and leaves for an entire course, and then comes back with fucking *flecks of blood* on his collar and an ice pack on his

knuckles.” He shakes his head. “I mean, what sort of gangster-ass shit is *that*?”

I laugh.

“So…” Val sighs, leaning against the wall. “For real. Who’s the dude you’re banging?”

Not banging, but whatever.

“He’s…” I shrug. “Older?”

Val arches a brow. “Ooh, how *much* older?”

I smile weakly. “Enough that I’m not going to give you a number.”

He hoots. “Fuckin’ *juicy*. I love it. So, sugar daddy?”

“No! Fuck!” I glare at him. “Just because he’s older, he’s a sugar daddy?”

“Nah, just because he’s older and *buying you fancy shit*,” Val corrects, eying my clothes. I look down.

Shit.

I’ve been trying to downplay my outfits ever since Kir’s personal shopper filled my walk-in closet with *insanely* gorgeous designer clothes. Not because I don’t like them—I *love* them. But I’ve been trying to avoid conversations exactly like this one with anyone who knows me and might be confused because I’m suddenly wearing D&G instead of Target or Salvation Army.

I exhale. “He likes buying me stuff,” I say slowly. “But he's *not* a sugar daddy.”

Val holds up his hands in mock surrender. “Okay, okay.”

My mouth twists. “It’s just clothes, Val.”

“Well, yeah, and the Range Rover.” Val winks at me. “I’ve seen you getting out of one a few blocks from here before rehearsal a couple of times this week.” He grins. “Hey, I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. You deserve to be pampered, B.”

I smile. “Thanks, dude.”

“He treats you okay, though?” Val’s smile instantly drops, his jaw tensing.

Val’s funny. On the surface, between dancing ballet and dating men, it could be easy to pigeonhole him. But I’ve always joked with him that if someone didn’t know he was bi, they’d think he was the straightest dude they’d ever met.

I mean, stereotypes can go get fucked, but Val presents as almost *ludicrously* straight. His style is somewhere between a gym bro and a raver. He doesn’t do *shit* to his typically messy hair. He loves weightlifting, muscle cars and motorcycles, watches *lots* of sports, and his tattoos are super aggressive and masculine.

He's also ultra protective of us girls in the company. It's sweet, and it always makes me smile, the way it’s juxtaposed against ballet-dancing, party-boy Val.

“He is,” I smile quietly, blushing. “A lot more than okay, actually.”

Val nods. “*Good*.” He shoots me a look. “Make sure he knows I’ll beat the shit out of him if that changes.”

I know Val knows how to fight, and he’s strong, and *built*. But even so, even with Kir being eighteen years older than him…I’m not sure he’d win that one.

“You walking out?”

I nod.

“Cool, I’ll walk you to your mystery boyfriend’s chauffeured Range Rover.”

I roll my eyes as the two of us fall into step, heading out the back door of the Mercury and up the alley to East 49th Street.

“Hey…” I furrow my brow, glancing over at him. “You’re…generally good with, you know…people.”

Val smirks. “Why does 'people' feel like code for my sex life?”

I grin. “Not a dig, I swear. You’re just…good at talking to people, figuring out what they want…what *you* want…” I trail off, blushing, looking at the sidewalk.

“Fuck me,” Val grunts. “Mr. Boyfriend not know how to make you come?”

I bark out a laugh, my whole body simmering as I avoid his eyes. “No, that part is…” There’s no stopping the grin that spreads over my face. I don’t trust myself to speak, so I just make an “okay” sign with my fingers. Val cracks up.

“Fuck *yeah*, girl,” he chuckles. “Go get it. So…what’s the problem?”

I groan inwardly, realizing there’s literally no way to have this conversation without getting fairly personal. But it’s *Val*. It's not like I haven’t heard every single gory detail of *his* sex life.

“*He* does *me* all the time,” I blurt awkwardly.

“I'm sorry, *does you*?” Val snickers.

I glare at him. “Makes me…you know.”

“You can say the word orgasm, B. What are you, Evie?”

I huff. “Fine! He makes me come, a lot, *all the time*. But he’s…” I shrug. “Cagey about me returning the favor.”

Val looks at me. “Hold up. If I’m reading between the lines…” He arches a brow. “Have you seriously *not fucked this man yet*?”

I flush crimson, shaking my head.

“*Wow*.” Val blows out a breath. “So, to recap, you’re with an older rich guy who likes buying you nice clothes, chauffeuring you around the city in a Range Rover, eats pussy like it’s going out of style, and *does not* expect or even want you to fuck him or return the favor in any way.” He looks at me like I'm crazy. “And you have a *problem* with this?”

I groan. “I mean…*kinda*?”

He nods sagely. “Actually, that’s cool. I get it. I’m a giver too.”

I groan.

“What’s his deal, anyway?”

My mouth twists. “He says I’m not ready for him.”

Val hoots. “*That's* what he says? Could you make him sound any hotter?!”

I nod. “Yeah. He says his *brand* of sex is going to be too much for me.”

“I think I just came.”

“*Dude*!” I punch Val in the arm as he laughs.

“Okay, that's enough, Rocky.” He eyes me. “Have you tried just going for it? Like, don’t ask to jump his bones, just…jump his bones.”

I frown. “That sort of sounds like an absence of consent.”

Val rolls his eyes. “B, it sounds like the man goes down on you every hour on the hour. Consider that implied consent. Jesus, our generation is *fucked*.” He shakes his head as he looks me dead in the eye. “Brooklyn, don’t politely ask him if you can suck or ride his dick. Pull on your big girl panties…or in this case, maybe take them off…and just fucking *do it*. Then you can *both* decide if you’re ready for his…” He groans, biting his knuckle. “*Brand* of fucking.”

I suck on my teeth, mulling over his words.

“Don’t ask,” Val repeats. “Just pull his dick out and rock his world. *You’re* in charge of your life, so… Take fucking charge.”

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BROOKLYN

Don't ask. You're in charge of your life. So… Take fucking charge."

He's right. I'm done being told I'm not ready, or I can't handle it.

It's been me against the world since I was *nine*. I fought off predators. Survived hunger. Kept fighting when I could have lain down and given up.

I lived out of Pearl for a year, for fuck's sake.

I can handle anything.

That's my mindset when I walk into Kir's house after his driver brings me home. It's time to take what I want.

Or rather, *give* what I want…

My pulse is thudding as I walk down the long, elegant hallway to Kir's office. The door is shut, and I can hear the quiet murmuring of his voice behind it—shifting effortlessly between Russian and English.

I take a deep breath, feeling a throbbing pull deep in my core. Then I twist the knob, push the door open, step into the room, and close the door behind me.

Kir looks up and smiles when I enter, but then his brow pinches and he points to the phone in his hand.

I just bite my lip and grin as I walk toward him. Kir looks at me in puzzlement until I start to undo the top button of my blouse, then the

second, then the third. His brow darkens, his jaw clenching as he slowly shakes his head, pointing to the phone again.

Too bad.

My top hits the floor, followed immediately by my bra as I slowly walk closer.

His gaze hardens, his eyes flickering with dark fire as they hungrily roam over me. He covers the phone with a hand. "*What the fuck are you doing*?" he mouths.

Taking what I want.

My skirt drops next, leaving me standing there in knee-high socks and my panties. Kir growls something in Russian into the phone, then sets it down on the desk. His eyes rove over me, his jaw tightening.

"We're muted right now," he growls, eying me. "I *cannot* postpone this call, Brooklyn. So whatever you're up to—"

"I understand," I purr, swinging my hips as I walk around the side of his desk.

His eyes flash, dragging slowly up and down my body.

"I'm not sure you understand at all," he murmurs.

I drop to my knees in front of him. For a moment, I see pure need and hunger roaring in his eyes, and my pulse spikes erratically. But then his hand shoots out, and his fingers wrap around my throat, squeezing just enough to halt my descent.

"*Why*," I spit, looking him right in the eye. "What are you so afraid of?"

Kir's lips tighten, his Adam's apple bobbing as his eyes pierce into me. "I *told you*," he rasps, like he's fighting himself. "You aren't ready for—"

"Like *fuck* I'm not."

Pure, venomous need sparks in his eyes.

“I don’t let you touch me, Brooklyn,” he hisses, “because every time I see your gorgeous lips, I want to *fuck them* until they’re swollen and covered in my cum.”

Fucking hell.

I wanted him before. Now I’m fucking *ravenous* for him.

“I want to use your mouth like a *hole*,” he snarls. “And when I fuck you, little sinner,” he chokes, “I’m not going to make love to you. I’m going to *fuck you*, hard, without mercy, probably with your wrists bound, your legs tied to a spreader bar, and my hand around your throat.” The vein in his temple throbs almost in time with the hammering of my pulse. “And with what you’ve seen, you’re not—”

“You don’t get to tell me what I am or am not ready for,” I say evenly, meeting his eyes unflinchingly.

Time seems to stand still. Finally, he takes a slow, measured breath, his eyes never once leaving mine.

“If we’re going to do this—”

“We are,” I blurt.

His lips curl darkly at the corners. “Then we’ll do it *my way*.”

Heat drips down my spine to pool between my legs as I kneel before him.

“Meaning?” I whisper.

Kir’s eyes flicker.

“Meaning stand up and walk back to the door.”

My brow furrows, anger surging inside of me.

“But you said—”

“Do you trust me, babygirl?”

I blink.

“*Do. You. Trust. Me*,” Kir growls. “If you don’t, implicitly, then we’re not—”

“I do trust you,” I breathe, shaking. “*Sir*.”

A sound rumbles low in his chest, his eyes dragging over my body before locking on my eyes again.

“Then stand up, walk over there, and *wait until I tell you what to do*.”

I shiver, biting back a whimper when he reaches out and cups my jaw. My nerves, excitement, and pure need for him are at such a fever pitch that him just touching my skin feels orgasmic.

He slips his fingers from my face, then nods his chin at the door. Breathless, my legs shaking, I stand and walk back to it.

“Stop. Now face me.”

A tremor ripples through my core as I turn back to him.

“I do need to get back to this call,” he murmurs.

I nod. “I understand.”

“Good girl.”

Fuck…

“On your hands and knees,” he says, his voice low and raspy, his veined hand stroking his chiseled jawline as his eyes slide over me.

I get down to the floor, placing my palms on the sumptuous area rug.

“Now *crawl* to me.”

A bolt of fierce, vicious wickedness explodes through my body. My thighs clench tightly together, heat burning between them as my nipples tighten.

“*Yes, sir*.”

Kir watches me steadily as he picks the phone up, touches the screen, and brings it to his ear. He starts speaking in Russian again, but his eyes never

leave me as I crawl all the way to his desk and around the side until I'm between his spread legs.

I look up at him, my lower lip caught between my teeth as our eyes lock.

He just nods and mouths "good girl" before barking into the phone.

It's outrageously hot. Alarmingly, disturbingly so, to the point that my hands shake when I sit up on my knees and let my palms land on his thighs.

I feel his quads flex under the fabric of his trousers, and my pulse skips when my gaze drags up and I see the tight, throbbing bulge.

My hands slide up his legs until they reach his belt. My fingers tremble as I undo it and pull it open, looking up to see his eyes drilling into me as he speaks into the phone. My skin tingles, my core clenching and spasming as I pop the button of his trousers.

I struggle with undoing the zipper, because he's so hard that his cock's tenting his trousers and making it difficult. But I finally manage to drag it down and then slip my fingers inside the waist of his pants. When I tug those down, my throat bobs, my eyes widening as they land on the *huge* bulge in his black boxer briefs.

A needy throb curls and twists and flexes inside me. I lick my lips.

He looks *really* fucking big.

Kir growls something into the phone and then covers the mouthpiece with his hand as his eyes lock with mine.

"*Take it out, babygirl,*" he purrs. "Take it out so I can feel those pretty lips wrapped around my cock."

My pulse hammers in my ears as I slip my fingers into the elastic and peel the boxers down from his hips.

I wondered the other day, when I first woke up here, how it could all be real.

…I suddenly have the exact same question when Kir's *huge*, thick, veined, swollen cock slips free of his boxers and swings up to slap against his

stomach.

What.

The.

Fuck.

My jaw drops as I just *stare* at him.

He's fucking *massive*. Enormously so. Like where-do-you-hide-the-bodies. It is, without question, the largest cock I've ever seen in my life, including porn.

Big dick energy.

My pulse skips, my breathing turning ragged as my eyes simply take him in, widening when I see the vein down the underside of him pulse, and a thick drop of precum bead at the tip.

I tremble as I reach for him. My fingers curl around his thickness, and my mouth drops open even further when I feel him pulse in my hand like silken steel.

My fingers don't actually touch when they wrap around his cock.

Slowly, I start to move my hand, stroking up and down, thrilling at the feel of him in my grip. I can feel him swelling—somehow, impossibly, growing even larger in my hand.

My eyes slide up to his, and when I see the fierce, hungry look in them, a feeling of power shudders through me.

I did this.

He's hard and big *for me*.

I bite back a moan as I squeeze my thighs together, feeling the needy heat between them soaking into my panties. My eyes stay locked on Kir as I lean forward and open my mouth.

He tenses, his jaw clenching as I drag my tongue up the underside of his swollen head. I do it again and again, growing bolder as my tongue swirls

over his crown, tasting the salty-sweet drop of precum leaking from the hole at the tip.

Fuck, he even *tastes* good.

I look up at him again, feeling the raw power in his gaze heating my skin, empowering me. My mouth opens wider, and with my eyes locked on his, I wrap my lips around his head.

God, is he big. My jaw stretches, my hand stroking up and down as I push my mouth down over his crown, barely getting an inch of it into my mouth.

I slide back off, whimpering a little as I tongue the underside of him. I drag my mouth lower, teasing my tongue down his veined shaft until the wet tip of it swirls over his heavy, swollen balls.

Kir grunts, pulling the phone away from his mouth for a second as his eyes flash. He grits his teeth, slowly bringing the phone back to his ear and grunting Russian into it. His other hand slides down, and when he tangles my hair into a fist, a heated thrill snakes through me.

I slide my tongue back up, swirling it around his head before I take him into my mouth again. This time, emboldened and more determined, I relax my jaw and sink my lips down his shaft, managing to take more of him into my mouth.

His whole face goes taut, his teeth flashing. His fist tightens in my hair, sending a pulse of heat into my core as I moan around him, pushing my mouth even further down onto his cock. The head hits the back of my throat, and I stay like that, whimpering around him, feeling my spit drip and drool out of the corners of my mouth and trickle down his shaft.

I pull off him with a gasp, my eyes watering as I look up at him with a needy ache that makes my head spin.

Kir’s still trying to continue whatever conversation he’s having on the phone. For some reason, that’s just turning me on even more.

I tongue the underside of him and slide down to suck on his heavy balls again, getting them slick with my tongue before I drag my mouth back to his head. I look up at him, locking my gaze with his. My core tightens.

“*Use my mouth, sir*,” I murmur quietly, my pulse thudding. “*Fuck my lips*.”

This time, he doesn’t say that I’m not ready. He just locks those dark devil eyes with mine, wraps my hair around his fist, and mouths the word, “*Open*.”

I do so, my core clenching as I ease my mouth down to his head. Then he thrusts up into my mouth.

Fucking YES.

I moan as Kir suddenly goes from being the receiver to fully in charge. His fist is tight at the back of my head, tugging my hair and guiding my wet mouth up and down his throbbing, huge dick. He grits his teeth, his ass rising from the chair as he literally starts to *fuck* my mouth.

I am *soaked*.

“*Show me,*” he mutters, his eyes blazing with black fire. “*Play with that messy, greedy little cunt while I fuck your pretty mouth, babygirl*.”

I moan eagerly, drooling all over him as my hand thrusts between my thighs with embarrassing speed and shoves into my panties. I whimper when my fingers roll and pinch my clit, rubbing the throbbing nub as I gag on his cock.

Our eyes lock as he starts to thrust harder, fucking his big dick deep down the back of my throat as wet, sloppy *gluck* sounds fill the office.

His jaw is like iron, his chest rising and falling as he utterly gives up on contributing to what I hope isn’t just a two-person conversation. He cradles the phone against his shoulder, and I moan when his hand slides down into my hair as he fully takes control.

Suddenly, he’s well and truly fucking my mouth with deep, powerful thrusts. I’m moaning and whimpering and mumbling around him, feeling my jaw stretched to the limit, my lips wrapped tight around his thickness. I’ve got one hand buried in my panties, rubbing my swollen clit frantically, the other stroking the considerable part of his cock I can’t get into my mouth as he rams into the back of my throat over and over, gritting his teeth.

He starts to swell bigger, his thrusts getting rougher as his eyes clash with mine. His brow caves, and when I feel his thighs clench, I whimper as I suck on him even harder, drooling all over him, making him wet as he fucks my mouth.

With a choked groan deep in his chest, Kir shoves his cock into the very back of my throat. And then, he starts to come.

Explosively.

I moan when I feel the first jet of hot cum spray across my tongue. I swallow it just as a second rope fills my mouth. Then a third, and a fourth.

Holy fuck.

He just keeps coming. No matter how quickly I swallow it, more and more cum gushes into my mouth, until it's dripping down his shaft and my chin, and coating my lips.

I've barely slid my mouth off him before he throws the phone aside, scoops me up off the floor, and lifts me into his lap. He cups my jaw and crushes his lips to mine, growling into the kiss as our tongues dance together, not even giving a single fuck that he's just filled my mouth with his cum.

I moan and kiss him back, clutching at his face and shamelessly grinding my drenched panties and throbbing pussy against his still-hard cock.

"Did my babygirl make a fucking mess of her panties sucking my cock like a good girl?" he murmurs into my mouth,

My face caves as I nod eagerly, grinding against him.

"*Yes, sir*…" I moan.

"We can't have that, can we."

With a single sweep of his arm, he clears his desk, drapes me across it with my legs hanging off the edge, and yanks off my panties. I cry out when he buries his face between my thighs, his tongue snaking around my clit as he sucks it between his lips. Two thick fingers curl into me, fucking me hard and fast and deep as he mercilessly sucks and tongues my button.

It takes all of thirty seconds before my back is arching from the desk and a scream ripping from my throat, the orgasm tearing though me like a hurricane.

I collapse back on his desk, utterly spent—my thighs shaking and slick, his cum still on my chin, and pure fire humming through my veins as he gathers me into his arms.

“How was *that*,” I mumble, a goofy, lazy grin on my face.

“*Very good*,” he growls quietly, leaning down to let his lips brush mine. “That was *way* too fucking good.”

Then I stretch up, closing the distance between our mouths as he carries me from the room.

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KIR

I TRY to tell myself that I need to slow down. That the last fucking thing Brooklyn needs is yet another man lusting after her and gazing at her with eyes that scream “swallow my cock”.

But all that goes to *shit* whenever she even looks at me.

“Kir?”

I blink, my brow knitting as I refocus on her.

Case. In. Point.

Last I remember, I was sitting at my desk. Then Brooklyn walked in after getting home from rehearsal. I forget everything after that because apparently all I can do when this girl comes into a room is *stare* at her.

I clear my throat. “Sorry—what?”

Brooklyn flashes an amused look. “Senior moment?”

“*Careful, babygirl*.”

She grins impishly. “Did you hear *anything* I just said?”

“I lost the plot when you walked into the room.”

Heat spreads across her face, her eyes twinkling.

“I need your help,” she says. “My callback with *Imperiya Korona* is in a few weeks, and…” She shrugs eloquently. “Nobody else pushes me like you do.”

“I should hope not.”

She rolls her eyes. “You know what I mean. You make me work for it in ways even Madame Kuzmina doesn’t.” She exhales. “Look, I know Ivan Yelchin is a friend of yours—” She shakes her head when she sees me start to open my mouth. “No, I’m not asking that, I never *would*. I don’t want favors. I want to get the apprenticeship because I’m *the best*. Not for any other reason.”

Something stabs in my chest as I smile at her.

This is quickly coming to a head. Sooner rather than later I need to figure out what the fuck I’m doing with my deal to push Inessa through to Ivan.

Brooklyn takes a breath. “I need you to coach me again. Like before.”

I slowly nod. “When did you have in mind?”

“I’m ready right now?”

I smile. “That’s my girl.”

Brooklyn blushes deeply.

* * *

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, we’re in the ballroom of my house: Brooklyn in a leotard and practice tutu, me in gym pants and t-shirt.

I stand to one side, connecting my phone to the in-ceiling speaker system as I watch her finish stretching before she moves to the middle of the ballroom.

“Do you know yet what you're going to do?”

“We have a list we can choose from. I've picked the girl's variation from Victor Gsovsky's *Grand Pas Classique*.”

Holy shit. That variation is a nightmare of turns *en attitude* that quickly turn into balances. Slow *développés* held for extremely long periods of time, which end in fifth position *en pointe.* The final diagonal is all on the right leg, followed by turns *en manège*, *also* on the right leg. And that's all aside from the fact that even during a performance, never mind an audition, there's no eye-catching set to distract from a mistake. The music's not even particularly dramatic.

It's just the dancer, alone on stage, every single flaw glaringly obvious.

"Brooklyn—"

"I know," she says flatly, as if reading my thoughts. "Like I said: I want to get in because I'm *good*."

"You can still show them how good you are with something el—"

"This is what I'm doing for the callback, Kir."

Goddammit. That sharp defiance in her is unreasonably attractive, and I'm a fucking *sucker* for it. I find the music on my phone before I lean back against the wall and nod to her.

"I hope I don't have to ask if you know the choreography already."

She rolls her eyes. "What is this, amateur hour? Yeah," she smiles. "I know it."

I dip my chin and hit the play button on my phone. "Dance for me, then."

The music begins, and then?

She does.

I resist the urge to drop my jaw as I watch her *attack* the difficult piece. She's a blur of arabesques and balances and pure grace when she holds the *développés.* I stand there fucking *mesmerized*.

She wasn't lying, either. She knows *every* step, hits every single mark, and by the time the piece is done, I'm genuinely not sure I have any feedback for her other than "magnificent."

I hit stop when the music finishes. Brooklyn stands panting in the middle of the ballroom, her chest rising and falling as she holds the final position, blonde tendrils clinging to her forehead.

She relaxes, her cheeks flushed as she turns to me. “Well?”

WELL it was perfect and I have nothing to say.

But that’s not what she’s looking for. And if I ignore the part of me that is utterly captivated by this woman, I’m sure I can find the asshole lurking beneath.

“You were late with the *retiré*. That's why you struggled with the abrupt stop.”

Ahh, there he is.

Brooklyn shoots me a look. She fucking *knows* she just nailed the shit out of that, which means she knows I’m letting my inner dickhead out. But we both *also* know she asked for my feedback.

“What else?”

When I hesitate, she shakes her head. “No holding back. I want brutal honesty. Ivan won’t know I’m your…” She flushes, clamping her mouth shut. “That we—”

“No, he won’t,” I mutter.

She nods. “So, let me have it. I want you to be an asshole.” She grins. “Overlook the fact that you came in my mouth yesterday.”

I groan, my dick twitching in my pants. She giggles. “Ooh, I think I just made you blush.”

“Keep it up and I’ll make that ass blush with this hand,” I growl.

Brooklyn grins at me, and *goddammit*, my heart twists and flexes.

“You came out of the last *développé* a touch too soon. You need to nail the balances *en pointe* better. Your *manège* needs tightening, and your arabesques were uninspiring.”

Brooklyn’s lips purse, fire sparking in her eyes.

“*Uninspiring*?”

I lift a shoulder.

I watch her drink in the frankly *asshole* critique before swallowing it down.

“Fine,” she mutters. “Thanks for the feedback.”

I grin at her. She purses her lips, but it slowly turns more into her holding a smile back in return as her eyes sparkle.

“Again,” I say. “From the top, when you’re—”

“I’m ready,” she says quickly.

This time, when she starts to dance, I’m no longer a smitten bystander. I move around her as she pirouettes and balances; appraising, assessing.

“More lift!” I say sharply. “Into the—*yes.* Good. Perfect.”

Her body twists and glides, her feet flying over the floor and her ankles snapping to attention as she goes up *en pointe*. I move closer to her, guiding her as if pulling invisible strings from less than a foot away.

She twirls, and my hands land on her hips. She elegantly unfurls her hand to the ceiling, letting her gaze follow it up, and I’m right behind her, my hand ghosting up her arm to lift her fingers just a touch higher.

When she does the first diagonal, I'm there too, tracing a finger down the back of her thigh, lifting her knee just a hair to perfect the line of the *attitude*.

Brooklyn hits the final position and comes to a panting, gasping stop, her back against my chest, one of my hands on her hip, the other on her gracefully upturned wrist.

The music stops, and her chest heaves as she delicately holds the pose.

“*And that*?” she breathes, her body trembling under my touch.

“*That*,” I murmur quietly, leaning down to let my lips brush her ear, drawing a quiet little gasp from her throat, “*was perfection*.”

For a second, time stops.

She’s the one to break the moment eventually, slowly turning in my arms to face me. I keep my hand on her wrist, and when she twists into me, my arm snakes around her, pulling her tight against my chest.

She’s still breathing hard, her breasts heaving against me as her crystal blue eyes lock with my dark pools. Electricity crackles between us. Every nerve in my body tunes to hers—sensing her, touching her, inhaling her feminine, slightly floral scent as my eyes stay riveted to hers.

Her breath catches. Her lips part, glistening as the lower one trembles and begs to be fucking devoured.

It’s that little tremble that finishes me. With a groan, I crush my mouth to hers, growling into her mouth as I kiss her fiercely. Brooklyn moans, her lips parting and her tongue tangling with mine as I utterly *claim* her mouth.

It’s a riot of panted breaths, nipping teeth and soft, swirling tongues as I clutch her tightly to me.

Finally she pulls back, her eyes wild as they search mine, her lips swollen and bruised from my kisses.

“*I don’t want to be told what I am and am not ready for anymore*,” she whispers quietly, her head slowly shaking side to side. “You don’t scare me. *This*,” she chokes, sliding her hand to my chest, her fingers over my heart, “doesn’t scare me.”

“*Brooklyn—*”

“You keep telling me I’m not ready for you. And I’m fucking telling you, *I am*.”

My jaw sets. My eyes spark, pure need and hunger surging through my veins.

“Go to my bedroom,” I growl quietly.

Her eyes open wide in shock. Her throat bobs as she swallows and nods.

“When you get there, take off all your clothes. Then get on my bed on all fours, facing the pillows.”

“*And then*?” she breathes.

“And then, babygirl,” I growl quietly, “we’ll see how ready you really are.”

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BROOKLYN

I've never been in here before.

It's not a new revelation as I step into Kir's bedroom. But it's the first time that it's hit me with this much of a punch.

I shiver as I walk across the floor of the *huge*, elegant, very masculine room. It smells like him in here—that clean citrus mixed with a hint of pine. I inhale deeply, filling my lungs with his scent as my eyes drink in my surroundings.

The details of the room are so *him*. Dark walls. Gold and brass accents. A fireplace on one side of the room, across from the enormous king-sized bed.

"When you get there, take off all your clothes, then get on my bed on all fours, facing the pillows."

My heart races as I slowly walk over to the bed. I run my hand over the duvet, my skin prickling as if lightning is about to strike. Moving to the head of the bed, I blush when I lean down to inhale the scent of him off the pillows.

I've been turned on ever since I felt him move with me on the dance floor—when his fingers snaked around my hip and his touch guided my movements.

But now, I'm so wet and ready for him that I'm shaking.

I peel off my clothes, setting them aside before I climb onto the bed. For a second, I lie across it on my back, luxuriating in the erotic feel of *his* bed and *his* sheets and duvet underneath my bare body.

But then the heat between my legs and the raw hunger churning inside me start to be too much.

I get on my hands and knees as instructed, feeling utterly exposed as I arch my back and rest my face against the duvet.

This is really happening.

Nervous, anxious energy ripples through me, making my toes curl and my fingers fidget. But it's not a bad anxiousness.

Actually, for the first time quite possibly *ever*, I realize I'm about to have sex and I'm *eager* for it.

Aching for it, not looking for an escape.

I hear the bedroom door open, and my skin prickles, nipples tightening to points against the duvet and heat blooming between my legs as I sense his eyes sliding over me.

The lights dim, and I exhale quietly as I hear his footsteps approach the bed.

"You followed my directions well," he murmurs. "*Good girl*."

Fuck. The way those words slip over my skin like silk, or a tongue, when he says them. It's like my ears are wired directly to my pleasure center, and hearing him purr those two words sets me on fire.

I shiver, biting back a whimper when Kir traces a fingertip over my raised hip, then slides it to the small of my back. My skin ripples, my core tightening and fluttering as he slowly drags the finger over every little vertebra of my spine, until he reaches the top and wraps my hair around his fist.

He gathers my hair into a high ponytail, fastening it in place before letting his fingers walk back to the nape of my neck. He leans down close, and my breath catches when his lips brush my earlobe.

“I’m going to blindfold you.”

I nod, then gasp quietly when he slides a strip of black silk over my eyes, knotting it tightly at the back of my head, beneath the ponytail.

The sudden elimination of one of my senses instantly heightens the rest of them—his citrusy piney scent. The sound of his deep breathing. The brush of his skin over mine as he drops his hands from the blindfold.

“Do you trust me, little sinner?”

I shiver as I nod my head. “*Yes*.”

Kir takes a slow breath, and I whimper when I feel his fingertip slide back down my spine.

“I’m going to be completely and utterly in charge. I’m going to push you without holding back, Brooklyn. I’m going to tie you up.”

I gasp quietly, fear and ravenous excitement coursing through my body. He takes another breath before his dark, deep voice slips over my skin again.

“I’m going to hurt you, too. Not in a bad way,” he growls. “In a way that’s going to make you come alive.”

My pulse skips erratically, ringing in my ears as my body tightens.

“If it ever becomes too much,” he says, his voice low, “you’ll say a specific word, and we will stop, no questions asked, no judgement. Do you understand?”

I shiver, nodding my head. “*Yes, sir*.”

“Good. Now choose your safe word, the one you can utter and I’ll stop immediately. Don't choose anything vague like 'stop' or 'please', make it something very specific that you would never say in this situation. Even though I’m the one tying you up and dominating you, *you* are in control here, Brooklyn. You set the boundaries, and you decide when you’ve had enough. Is that clear?”

I nod again. “*Yes, sir*.” I wet my lips, thinking, my fingers tightening on the duvet. “*Arabesque*. Arabesque is my word.”

“Good. Remember that.”

The warning tone in his voice makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

“Face to the bed,” he murmurs. “Reach your hands out toward the wall.”

My heart skips as I bend all the way over, ass in the air and my cheek against the duvet. I stretch my arms out, trembling when I feel Kir’s hand stroke my forearm.

“Remember your safe word, little sinner.”

My breath catches as he wraps a strip of what feels like leather around my wrist and buckles it tight. He slowly walks around the bed to the other side, doing the same to the other wrist. I tremble when I hear what sounds like a small length of metal chain being fastened to each cuff.

Heat ripples down my spine.

He moves to the foot of the bed and runs a finger down one leg, teasing it down the back of my thigh, over my calf, then sliding it to my ankle.

“*Spread your legs, little sinner*.”

My face is throbbing, my body almost spasming with flickers of anxiety and anticipation. I do as he says, parting my knees, feeling my body heat as I sense his eyes sliding over my ass and my pussy.

“Remember that safe word,” he growls quietly.

Another cuff goes around my ankle. There’s something heavy attached to this one. He fastens the cuff, then moves around to the other ankle, buckling a leather strap around that one, too. I shift, but stiffen when I realize *I can’t*.

“It’s called a spreader bar,” Kir murmurs, his voice like leather and smoke. “You’ll be able to open your legs…*like this*…”

He wraps his fingers around one of my thighs and opens my legs a little more. There’s a dull metallic *clunk*, like a lock ratcheting into place.

“But you won’t be able to close them.”

I try to do so, and more heat surges through me. The heavy bar attached to the ankle cuffs is indeed keeping my legs spread apart.

Wordlessly, Kir moves back up the side of the bed and takes one of my hands. He pulls it back, tugging my wrist down to my ankle with the cuff wrapped around it. With another soft metal *click*, that arm is instantly immobilized.

He's just chained my wrist to my ankle.

He does the same on the other side, and suddenly, I'm on my knees on the bed, cheek against the duvet, ass in the air, my wrists bound to my ankles.

Pure heat explodes through me. I feels so unnervingly exposed and trapped. But there's no fear or panic, like I'd have expected. Just simmering, aching *need*.

My skin breaks into gooseflesh, my nipples tight points against the bed.

I bite my lip when something that feels like silky rope brushes my wrist. Kir loops it through what must be a metal ring attached to the wrist cuff and then pulls it tight, tying that side of my body to…what, another ring set in the side of the bed? He does the same thing to the other wrist, and I gasp when I feel the spreader bar notch open a bit more and then lock in place.

My pulse roars as I try to imagine what I look like: on my knees, cheek to the bed, my wrists pulled back and cuffed to my ankles; the spreader bar keeping my legs immobilized; and ropes tying my wrists to the sides of the bed. I'm utterly bound in place.

A low whine rings in my ears as my body flexes against the binds, heat teasing over my skin as I try to stop my breath from racing out of control.

With some of the things that have happened to me in the past, or more recently with Lou, this should be the world's biggest trigger. But Kir's words drift through my psyche, calming me even as my heart pounds.

Even though I'm the one tying you up and dominating you, you are in control here, Brooklyn. You set the boundaries, and you decide when you've had enough.

I hear him pause, and anticipation settles over me in the silence.

“How do you feel,” he murmurs.

“*Pinned*,” I whisper, my voice shaking. “But not in a bad way.”

Quite the opposite. The feeling of my arms and legs being restrained sends a shiver of heat through me. It’s like the removal of my control has me melting against the bed, eager for him to take it over.

Not just because he’s hot and makes my heart skip whenever I see him, but because I trust him—possibly more than I’ve ever trusted anyone in my life.

My pulse races when I hear him taking off his clothes—fabric hitting the floor, his belt clinking. It suddenly hits me that I’ve never actually seen him *naked*. Parts of him, of course…*large* parts of him. But never completely without clothes.

I bite my lip, imagining what those hard, grooved muscles will look like, will *feel* like. The bed shifts as he moves onto it behind me, and my breath catches when a low growl rumbles in his throat.

“You look so beautiful,” he murmurs, trailing a finger down my hip. “All trussed up and spread open for me.”

I whimper as his finger traces over my ass, then slips down between my legs. I moan into the sheets when he cups my pussy from behind, stroking a thick finger through my slickness, making me realize how fucking wet I am.

“Remember your safe word, little sinner,” he murmurs.

Suddenly, his palm is crashing against my ass with a sharp, quick spank. I yelp, the sound somewhere between a gasp and a moan as heat from the sting of his slap radiates all across my butt.

He does it again to the other cheek. And again my voice breaks when his palm smacks my ass, betraying the aching need I feel inside.

His open palm spanks my ass again. “With every smack,” he murmurs, “I want you to feel how *mine* you are. Every red mark on your perfect skin is a reminder of *whose you are*, little sinner.”

My body jolts as his palm crashes to my ass again.

“There will be ten more, babygirl,” he murmurs. “And you’ll count them like a good girl, without mistakes, or else I’ll start over. Is that understood?”

Fucking hell. It’s the way pure dominance and control are delivered with a velvety touch that makes me ache for him. That has my back arching, my breath choking against the sheets as I feel his hand stroke my throbbing ass.

His hand pulls back, and I brace myself.

Smack.

“*One*!” I cry out , my body pulling tight against my binds as he spanks me.

His palm smacks the other cheek, wrenching a whimpered cry from my throat as I sob against the sheets in pleasure and delicious pain.

“*Two*!” I choke.

On they go. Three. Four. Five. Six. By seven, my ass is on fire and vicious, hot need twists and coils my core. On eight and nine, every jerk of my body against the bed makes my nipples drag so electrically against the duvet that they’re throbbing and aching. Ten sends a ripple through me that makes my eyes roll back behind the blindfold, and my core tightens and clenches so hard it feels like I’m on the brink of an orgasm.

“*Ten*!” I cry into the sheets. My thighs shake, and my skin is on fire as I feel his palm gently rub and stroke the tender skin of my ass.

“*Such a good girl*,” he murmurs, sending a heated thrill through me as the words melt into my ear.

“I think you’ve earned this.”

I feel him shift behind me. Suddenly, my eyes fly open behind the blindfold, a choked cry strangling in my throat as without warning his tongue drags through my lips and sinks into my pussy. My whole body starts to shake and tremble. My knees slide a little more open, and I moan when I feel the bar lock into place again, keeping me even *more* spread open.

Kir growls into my pussy, tonguing me deeply as I melt against him. He lowers his mouth, his lips wrapping around my swollen clit and sucking it.

After all of it—the blindfold, the binds, the bar, the spanks, and the throbbing, surging anticipation—his tongue on my sensitive clit is like pulling a trigger.

I *scream* into the bedsheets, my whole body yanking hard on my restraints as I explode in orgasm. My muscles strain, my core clenching and spasming wildly as I come hard against his tongue, gasping for air and moaning into the sheets.

There's no break. No pause to let me catch my breath.

Immediately, he drags his tongue through my pussy again, then over my asshole, making me squeal. I feel him rise up and kneel right behind me with one hand firmly on my throbbing, heated ass.

My eyes bulge when I feel the huge, swollen head of his cock push between my slick lips.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Oh FUCK.

My mind flashes to how he was so fucking big yesterday I could barely fit him in my mouth. Remembers the sight of his huge dick, the bulging veins down his thick length, the fat, swollen head leaking precum…

Somehow, he's about to fit that inside me.

And *fuck*, do I want him to.

There's a spark of nervous fear, yes. But it's overshadowed by an avalanche of raw, primal need, and the overwhelming desire to feel him take me completely. To utterly submit to his dominance and let him fuck me however he wants until I'm nothing but his little toy.

"This messy pussy is dripping all over my cock, babygirl," he growls quietly, rubbing his fat head up and down my lips with wet, squelching sounds. I cry out, my pussy clenching and kissing the tip of his cock when his palm smacks my ass hard again. "I don't think we should keep her waiting any longer, do you?"

“*I—*”

My words die on my lips as Kir thrusts his fat cock *deep* inside me with one brutal thrust.

Holy. Fucking. *God*.

It hurts for a second, because *fuck*, he’s big. It feels like he’s tearing me in two as he thrusts in. But when he slowly starts to pull back out, the sensation turns on its head. The wince on my face melts away, my jaw going slack as a sensation I’ve never, ever felt melts through my core.

And it’s *so fucking good*.

Kir’s hips roll as he pushes back into me. This time, all I can do is moan: the sheer size of him even more of a turn on. The feeling of him utterly taking me, claiming me, *dominating me* melts me, turning my whole body into a throbbing, trembling mess. He keeps pushing in, and I whimper when I realize what I felt before was *not* him burying every inch inside me, though it felt like it.

Pretty sure that was just *half*.

I groan, my insides coiling as he feeds his cock into my dripping pussy. Holy *fuck*, it just keeps going, more and more of him pushing into me, like I’m getting fucked by a *horse*.

My arms and legs tighten, straining against the binds. Pleasure melts through me, my breath turning choked and ragged as Kir sinks every thick inch of his massive, gorgeous cock into me, until I can feel his chiseled abs against my ass.

My whole body is shaking. I’ve never felt this full before. Fuck, I’ve never even really *enjoyed sex* before, and this is so far beyond “enjoyable” that I don't have words for it.

“Transcendent”, maybe? “Earth-shattering”? Maybe the far less poetic “holy fucking fuck”.

I’m still shaking, feeling my walls clench and ripple around his cock as I suck in a rasping breath.

“*Breathe* for me, babygirl,” he murmurs darkly, his hands sliding over my ass, his fingers stroking my skin lightly. “I’ve got you. You’re doing so well, babygirl. You’re taking that big fucking cock like a such a good girl.”

God. The mix of pure dominance and sweet praise has me teetering on a knife’s edge, hanging by a thread as pleasure throbs through me.

I whimper when he grabs my hips tightly, slowly easing his huge cock out of me until just the head is inside, stretching me open.

“You look so beautiful with my cock stretching your pretty pussy, babygirl.” I shiver as his feathery touch teases over my skin before his big hands slowly tighten around my waist. “Like your cunt was fucking *made* for me.”

He thrusts in, harder this time, ramming his cock deep, shoving the air from my lungs and ripping a moan from my throat.

His hands tighten on me, a low growl rumbling in his chest as he saws his cock back out and then slides in again. His abs crash against my ass as he starts to pick up speed, fucking me with deep, hard, powerful strokes that push my face across the duvet as I moan and whimper, drooling with pure, unbridled pleasure.

Kir growls, reaching up and grabbing my ponytail He wraps it around his fist, pulling tight and making me squeal as fucks me. His sheer dominance sends me reeling, my fingers and toes spreading and curling, my body spasming and shaking as he pounds into me.

“You’re doing so well, babygirl,” he groans, thrusting hard into me and making me squeal in pleasure. “Taking my big dick like a good little fuck toy. Like *my* little fuck toy.”

Holy. Fucking. Fuck.

I’ve been talked to in demeaning ways before, but somehow, this is something else entirely. It makes me *throb* and ache for more. And I realize it’s for the same reason that I’m not freaking out at being bound and utterly helpless. Because I know, even though I’m all tied up and getting fucked like a rag doll…

I’m in charge.

I can end this whenever I want with my safe word.

Which is exactly why I don’t use it.

That safe word—arabesque—lingers in my head like a powerful talisman. It’s right there. I can pluck it down from the shelf and use it anytime, and this all stops. But I don’t want it to. For the first time in my life, I’m not counting the seconds until sex is over.

I’m hoping it never ends.

I cry out, sobbing and moaning into the sheets as Kir growls behind me and picks up the pace. His gorgeous, thick cock rams into me over and over, his heavy balls slapping my clit, his hands alternating between spanking me and running all over my body.

He’s everywhere at once, rolling and rubbing my clit, stroking my ass, teasing a thumb against my back hole in a way that sends a ripple of filthy, aching desire running up my spine. He’s palming my breasts, his fingers teasing and pinching my nipples as I scream into the sheets for more *more more MORE*.

“I can feel this sweet little cunt clenching and rippling around my cock, babygirl,” he rasps. “You’re trying to keep that orgasm from me. You’re trying to fight it. Don't. Just give me what’s *mine*.”

My mouth goes slack, drool soaking the sheets beneath me as he keeps pounding into me, the raw heat inside me curling and twisting and coiling.

“Don’t keep that from me, little sinner,” he groans. “Give it to me. Give me that fucking pretty pussy cum until it's all over my cock and dripping from my balls. Then and only then will I let you have my cum. So stop fucking holding back” —I cry out when he spanks my ass hard, his cock thrusting deep into me— “and *give me that fucking orgasm like a good girl.*”

It's like a trigger being pulled.

My entire body spasms and wrenches against the binds holding me in place. I *yell* my orgasm into the bedsheets, writhing and shaking as it thunders

through me. My eyes roll back, my back arching violently as Kir keeps fucking me right through my orgasm.

He groans, his cock swelling even bigger inside me. And suddenly, I’m moaning when I feel his hot cum spilling deep inside. He hisses and pulls out, stroking his fat cock against my pussy as more ropes of sticky, hot cum spurt across my ass and all over my pussy. He grunts and rams back in deep, grinding into me as more cum pulses from his cock.

Everything is buzzing. My very skin feels electrified, and there’s a low whine in my ears. I’m only dimly aware of him releasing my wrists and ankles and scooping me into his arms, and then I'm clinging to him in sweet fucking oblivion.

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BROOKLYN

"How did you get this?"

We're lying in his bed, me in his arms. Now that the blindfold's off, I've had a chance to truly look at him completely naked…

And holy *fuck*.

Talk about exceeding expectations.

The man is built like a freaking *god*. I'm not exaggerating when I say that *none* of the guys I dance with at the Zakharova—who are all basically fifteen to twenty years younger than Kir, and, you know, *professional athletes*—have physiques that even come close.

He's lean and powerful, with smooth, chiseled muscles. Currently, I'm using some of those warm, strong muscles as a pillow as I rest my cheek on his chest, listening to the even beat of his heart as I bask in everything that's just happened.

I trace a finger over the scar—one of several on his body—that I've just asked about, and his strong arms tighten around me. When he remains silent, I shake my head.

"You don't have to answer," I murmur.

"Siberia." He inhales slowly. "We were working on improving a rail line to accommodate heavier transports. The cold snapped a steel tie, and one of

the spikes launched out of the ground like a bullet and grazed me as it flew by."

I blink in shock, my brows knitting. My teeth worry my lip, my hand lying flat on his scar like I'm trying to heal it with my touch.

"I didn't know you worked in Siberia."

He grunts a mirthless laugh.

"It wasn't by choice."

I twist my head to look up into his face. "What do you mean?"

"Zavolzhsky Penal Camp Eighteen wasn't a job," he grunts. "It was a work camp."

I stare at him. "Like a prison camp?"

He nods, and my mouth twists.

"When was this?"

"About thirty-four years ago."

I frown, stiffening as I do the math before my eyes widen as I stare at him in shock and horror.

"You were fucking *ten*!? That's—" I stare at him in disbelief before my face caves, thinking about him as a *child* working in a Siberian labor camp and almost getting killed by a flying railway spike. "That's *horrible*."

His jaw tightens. "That's *Russia*, in the post-Soviet scramble for power between warring Bratva families and the actual government, which was really just a better-funded mafia group."

"Why…" I stop and shake my head. "Sorry, that's none of my—"

"Of course it is," he murmurs, his arms tightening around me. "I've made all of your life *my* business. It's only fair that you're free to know all about mine."

I chew on my lip, my eyes tracing over his gorgeous face.

How is this real?

“My father ran the Nikolayev family, back when it was little more than a ragtag street gang. Then the crackdowns happened. After my mother and uncle were killed, my father went to work for the rival family who had sold us out to the authorities, in order to safeguard my life, and my sister's.”

I blink. I didn’t know he had a sister.

“She’s dead now,” he says quietly, as if reading my thoughts. “But her son, my nephew, is alive and well.” He smirks. “Damian’s a lunatic, but he’s found his way. He’s in Japan: he married into a Yakuza family. He works for them now.”

I shake my head and then lower my mouth to kiss his chest. “I’m sorry about your family.”

“I’m sorry about yours.”

I exhale against his chest as his arm wraps around me, his hand moving a lock of blonde out of my eyes.

“So, Moscow, to a Siberian prison camp, to…Oxford?”

“Prison camp to *boarding school*, to Oxford.”

I shake my head. “That’s quite a journey.”

“I could say the same about yours,” he murmurs. “Perhaps now you can see why I was holding back before when it came to you and I.”

I frown quizzically, and he exhales with a smile.

“*I’ve got scars older than you are, babygirl*.”

I blush as he cups my jaw, leans in, and kisses me, slow and deep.

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BROOKLYN

ANNND JUST LIKE THAT, there's another shift in my life.

One day, I’m technically *not* fucking the man twenty years older than me who owns the ballet company I dance with. The next day, I am.

Very much so.

And “frequently” doesn’t even cover it.

There’s no slow easing into it, either. I still have all my things in my room, but immediately after that first time, I spend every night in his bed, in his arms.

Under him. On top of him. With my back arched before him as he fucks me to hell and back with his *perfect* cock.

I wake up to his mouth or fingers on me, or I wake *him* up by pushing my ass back, raising one leg, and guiding his morning stiffness into my drenched pussy. Usually, he fucks me again at the breakfast table, or in the shower, or both.

Usually at rehearsal, if we have a break while Madame Kuzmina works with a small group of dancers, I still end up sitting with my friends or doing some conditioning. But there’s been twice in the last week where I took a “short break” and stepped outside to bolt down the alley to Kir’s waiting car, after which he drove us to a secluded parking garage and fucked my brains out in the back seat.

At night, after I get home from the theater, we take our time.

Usually, he ties me up or surprises me with some new, pulse-pounding binding device.

I *like* this new shift in my life.

A lot.

I discovered early that sex was something to be feared and that you had to keep to yourself, or else some man would forcibly take it from you. That was my daily reality after I hit my teens in the system, and it's been like that my entire adult life on my own.

Until him.

There's a certain comical irony that the brutal, *literal* Bratva kingpin who's into bondage and pain has been the first man to show me what tenderness could look like—what it means to have control and agency over your body and sex.

But here we are.

"Thanks for the ride, Matvey!"

Kir's man, who spent the first three or four times we met pretending to be an Uber driver, turns to nod at me through the partition as I open the back door of the Range Rover.

"You are very welcome, Miss," he rumbles in his heavy Russian accent.

I feel myself tingling as I skip across the stone driveway toward the back door. But I pause, my brow furrowing when I spot it.

Next to Kir's Aston Martin, there's a matte black Lamborghini Revuelto sitting in the driveway that I've *definitely* never seen before, with blacked out windows and a small pink skull and crossbones painted onto the back fender, right above the Lamborghini logo.

Odd.

My brow is still furrowed as I walk inside. I texted Kir earlier about dinner ideas, but I'm guessing he's still neck deep in work, because I haven't heard

back from him. I almost head up to his office, because, well, I missed him today. I'm a huge dork and I miss him *all* the time when I'm not with him.

The less flowery reason is that I'm *seriously* horny, and I'm more than slightly curious to see what he'd do if I tried to fuck him while he's on a work call.

I head upstairs to my room first to drop off all my dance crap. I grunt, easing the bag off my shoulder just as I swing the door open—

Reality shatters around me, my heart tensing and then breaking as a girl whips around with a gasp on her lips, staring at me with wide, horrified eyes.

Close to my age. *Gorgeous*, with super pale skin, jet black hair, and a bit of a gothy look. She's got a myriad of tattoos, including a stunning koi fish swimming up her arm. *Her fucking nipples are pierced*.

I know all this because she's standing in *my fucking bedroom* in lacy black lingerie with the bra pulled down while she poses for selfies, her arm extended.

"*Fuck!*" she blurts as she stares at me.

I can't even say a word. All I can do is drop my bag and slowly back away, my heart shattering as my throat closes.

Did you really think you were the only one…

I hate him. I hate the tears that sting my eyes as I whirl and bolt down the hallway, half falling down the stairs before I rush through the house and out the back door.

Matvey is just pulling away but his brake lights flash when he sees me chasing after the car.

"Miss?"

"*Midtown*!" I blurt. "Quickly, please."

* * *

“YOU *SURE* YOU’RE OKAY?”

I look up miserably from my drink, meeting Roman’s eyes.

“I'm fine,” I shrug, taking another heavy sip of my overpriced rooftop bar martini.

He looks at me dubiously.

“*Riiight*. You and I are *always* hanging out when there’s nothing wrong,” he says, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

I smile glumly at him.

“We should do this more often, then,” I shrug. “For real, you know, hang out just to hang out. Not just because one of us is spiraling or in the dumps.”

He frowns. “I never spiral.”

I exhale. “You know what I mean.” I smile wryly and reach across the table to pat my hand on his. “Sorry for only ever calling when I’m feeling fucked up.”

He grins and shakes his head. “Don’t worry about it. But I guess you also just admitted that you *aren’t* okay.”

Fuck.

“No I didn’t,” I protest, wanting to change the subject. “Hey, how’s that secret club thing of yours? You ever still looking for dancers—”

“Brooklyn.” Roman’s face is darkened and tense as he shakes his head. “You promised you’d never bring that up again.”

Months ago, at a fundraiser thing that some of us from the Zakharova were performing for, a man pulled me aside and told me he represented “an organization” who were always looking for dancers like me for their “functions”.

He didn’t say who the group was, or what these functions were. But it paid *five fucking thousand dollars* for about four hours of my time and did not involve taking my clothes off or doing anything sexual. Just dancing.

“Just dancing” ended up being “just dancing…in an elegant if revealing costume, a gold Venetian mask over my face, under which I was blindfolded.”

We—myself and the other girls I saw in the changing room at the venue we’d been driven to that night…also while blindfolded…wore earpieces, too, through which a voice guided us through the evening.

We each danced in our own cage, to music piped into our earpieces, while *something*—I don’t know what, because I couldn't see or hear—happened around us. But I guessed some sort of swingers club, or a high society orgy, given the level of secrecy, the money we were paid, and the overall vibe.

I did the gig a few times and even pulled in Lyra from the Zakharova once when she was really struggling—this was before she married Carmine. But then the calls from the unknown number stopped, and I assumed the gig was over.

It was a night a lot like this one, where I was down on myself and having drinks with Roman, when I mentioned that I’d had this *great* side gig dancing for this strange party, but the work had dried up, and I missed the cash.

Roman was pretty drunk that night, so I didn’t really understand him when he slurred something about not being “in charge of the entertainment for Black Court sessions”. But when he patted my shoulder and told me he’d “talk to Matteo about getting me hired again”, we both sobered up at the same instant.

He’d told me he was talking out of his ass and to ignore everything he’d just said. Then, when I kept joking about it, he got *super* serious—more serious than I think I’ve ever seen him—and made me swear we’d never talk about it again. He almost looked worried, which is *also* something I’d never seen in him before.

“Sorry,” I mumble into my drink as I take another sip. Then I glance at him. “You *really* aren’t hiring dancers—”

“*Stop it*,” he growls. “I’m dead fucking serious. You can’t talk about that shit, B. Ever. It makes me nervous, for *you*.”

I frown. “Hang on. Did the job go away because you and I hang out??”

When his mouth thins, I groan.

“*Seriously*, Roman?”

“Trust me.” He shakes his head. “You don’t want that gig.” He cocks a brow. “Besides, I don’t think you actually need it anymore.”

I frown at him. “Meaning?”

Roman smirks, rubbing a hand over his Abercrombie-and-Fitch-model jaw.

“C’mon, B. The new clothes? Jewelry? The fact that I saw you get dropped off here by a private driver in a Range Rover?” He grins. “I’m guessing you’re not pulling shifts at The Mirage anymore, either.”

I shake my head, looking down. “Well…no.”

“So, which is it: did you win the lottery, or is there someone new in your life with a *lot* of money that he likes to spend on you?”

I glare at him. “It’s not like *that*, if that’s what you’re implying.”

Roman shakes his head, holding his hands up. “That isn’t what I was implying at all. I just meant a guy in your life who was more than a little well off.”

I glower into my drink.

“Well,” I mutter. “There *was*.”

I knock the rest of the martini back in one swallow, grimacing.

Roman frowns. “Shit, I’m sorry,” he says gently. He rakes his fingers over his jaw again. “Anything you want to talk about?”

“Like the girl I just caught parading around his house in sexy lingerie?” I snarl. “Nah, not particularly.”

Roman’s face darkens. “Are you fucking serious?”

“*Yup*.”

He glowers. “Who the fuck is this guy, so I can go beat the shit out of him.”

I giggle, reaching across the table to pat his hand. “*So chivalrous*.”

“I’m serious, B. Fuck that guy. You’re a fucking catch, and he’s a damn idiot.” He sighs. “I’m gonna grab us another round.”

“Thanks, I think that’s an excellent idea.”

He ends up coming back with another martini for me, another whiskey for himself, and two shots of tequila.

I shake my head when he pushes one my way.

“Nope,” he shakes his head. “This is a necessary cure for lonely hearts. Drink up. Doctor’s orders.”

Fuck it. Why not.

We clink our glasses, sprinkle salt on our hands, shoot the tequilas, and then bite down on the limes.

“*Fuck*,” I groan, grimacing. “I just remember why I never do shots.”

Roman chuckles as he takes a swig of his whiskey.

“So, what about you?” I eye him.

“What about me?”

“You said this was the lonely-hearts club, plural. Why are *you* in the club?”

“I’m not,” he says, *far* too quickly.

“*Do* tell,” I grin, leaning onto my elbows and fixing him with a curious look.

“It’s nothing, B.”

“Bullshit.” I narrow my eyes. “Spit it out—wait! Is this about that marriage your dad wants to arrange?”

Roman looks away. “New topic.”

Yeah, like that’s happening.

I gasp. “Oh, oh. Is it a prince and the commoner kind of thing? You're in love with a regular girl, but King Dad wants you to marry a mafia princess?”

He stares at me incredulously. “You watch *way* too many movies.”

“What’s her name?”

He frowns. “The princess?”

“No! The commoner girl.”

He rolls his eyes. “For fuck’s sake, there is no commoner girl.”

I wink at him. “Commoner *boy*, then?”

His eyes snap to mine. “I’m fucking *straight*, Brooklyn. I don’t know why you keep pushing that.”

I roll my eyes. “Finefinefine. Be all touchy about it.” I smirk, feeling the effects of my second martini. “I’m going to go get us some truth serum.”

I come back to the table a few minutes later with two more tequila shots.

“Bottoms up,” I giggle as we tap glasses and bring them to our lips.

“Who’s the boy, Roman.”

He almost does a spit-take with his shot before he muscles the tequila down.

“Why the *fuck* are you so stuck on this? Like why exactly is it so hard to believe that I am utterly and completely straight?”

The gay hookup app open on your phone that night, I resist saying out loud.

“I’m just teasing you. Jeeeez.”

“Well, stop it. I like girls.”

“Yeah, you keep saying that,” I grin. “Say it again, and maybe it’ll sound—”

In half a second, before I can even finish my sentence, he's leaning across the table, grabbing the back of my head, and kissing me on the mouth.

What the FUCK.

It's only for a split second, because instantly, I'm jumping out of my chair and shoving him away from me.

"*Dude*," I blurt, wiping my mouth on the back of my arm. "What the *hell*?"

Roman is staring at me in pure horror, all the color drained from his face.

"*Fuck*, Brooklyn," he mumbles, shaking his head quickly. "I'm *so* sorry. That was... I don't know where the fuck that came from."

"Roman—"

"Brooklyn, I *swear*, I have no idea why I did that. There's no lingering subtext here. I'm *not* that guy pretending to be your friend to so that when you're lonely and single he can swoop in." He looks downright angry as he shoves his fingers through his hair. "Fuck, I am *so* fucking sorry."

I shake my head. "It's…fine."

"No it fucking *isn't*," he growls. "B, I'm…" He exhales and looks away. "I just…sometimes, I wonder if I—" He scowls. "I'm not even sure I'm…"

He exhales loudly and looks up at the city sky above us.

"I'm going to regret what just happened the rest of my life," he says quietly. He smiles wryly at me. "I mean, no offense."

I reach across the table to squeeze his hand. "None taken. Apology truly accepted." I smile at him. "It's *fine*, Roman. Seriously, we're good. It was just a little—"

Roman's hand is suddenly ripped away from mine as he's yanked from his chair and *thrown* into an empty table, crashing him and it to the floor.

I gasp as I lurch to my feet. My gaze drags from Roman, groaning and grimacing, pushing himself to his feet, to the man standing behind where Roman was just sitting.

Kir, looking fucking *livid*.

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33

KIR

MY IMMEDIATE REACTION to my study door banging open is to reach for the gun I keep holstered under the desk. But when my eyes focus on the grinning face peeking through the door, I smile widely.

“Hi, Dad.”

I chuckle as I stand, stride around the side of the desk, and scoop Freya into a big bear hug. She hugs me back fiercely, then pulls away and shakes her head, a weird look on her face.

“Nope. No ‘dad’. Sorry, I keep trying it on for size. But that’ll never feel right.”

I grin. “Just Kir worked fine for a long time. We can stick with that, *daughter*.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Eww, why do you say it like that? So weird.”

“What do you mean, *daughter*? Is it weird, *daughter*, when I call you—”

“Fuckin’ *stop*,” she groans, laughing.

I first met Freya and Annika when they linked up with Damian. The two of them had been scratching out a survival thieving on the streets of various European cities for years. Slowly, as they honed their talents—Annika's for pickpocketing and break-ins, Freya’s for computers—they started to make a name for themselves as a go-to team for certain jobs.

They ran afoul of Damian at a rich, snobby fundraiser where they were pretending to be catering staff while robbing the place blind—including lifting his watch.

Unfortunately—or *fortunately*, seeing how things turned out—Damian was taught by *me*, which means he saw the lift when it happened, and then tailed the two of them to the bar they slunk off to after the heist to gloat over their spoils.

Instead of busting them, the three of them teamed up. And soon, Freya and Annika came to work for me.

It wasn't until recently that we pieced together Freya's murky background: her mother, Petra, was the wife of a Norwegian mafia head who I was, unfortunately, doing business with—an abusive, cruel monster.

I know my brief affair with Petra was wrong, even if her home life was a mess. It wasn't *love* or anything close to that. I think we were just two broken people who found temporary escape with each other—she from her husband, me from the demons still chasing me from my time in Siberia. Then we parted ways, and I never knew Freya existed—as my own blood, that is—until recently.

But seeing as she's mainly in Japan now, I'm more than a little surprised to see her without notice, waltzing through my door halfway across the globe from where she calls home.

It's that thought that has my brow furrowing as I look at her.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, my voice edged.

She rolls her eyes. "What, I can't just bounce in and say hi to my *father*?"

"Of course you can, *daughter*—"

"Yeah, we have to stop that."

I chuckle. "I'm just surprised, is all."

She grins impishly. "There's a tech startup here in New York that Hana and I have been eyeing for an acquisition. I'm having a sit down with them

tomorrow night to get a feel for their tech first-hand. I thought I'd surprise you."

Hana Mori, Kenzo's sister and Damian's wife, is the head financial wizard of the Mori-kai's legitimate business interests.

"I thought I'd surprise you."

"Well," I smile. "You've succeeded."

"You still have that .45 under your desk?"

I nod. Freya grimaces.

"Shit. How close did I get to being shot?"

"Close enough that I'd *love* you to call or text next time."

She giggles. "What do you want to do for dinner? And I'm staying here while I'm in town, by the way."

Oh.

The only reason Brooklyn and I have been hiding our relationship is that neither of us wants people to get the wrong impression, for her sake.

I'm well aware how this could look: the young, beautiful dancer sleeping with the much older, wealthy, powerful man—especially if that man is *technically* her boss, given that I own the company she dances with.

I'm not embarrassed in any fucking way by our relationship, and I know she isn't either. But still, discretion is good for now.

That said, I'm sure my daughter will have questions regarding the twenty-three-year-old living in my house.

Sleeping in my bed.

Freya frowns curiously at me. "What?"

"Nothing." I smile at her. "Let's do dinner here. I'll cook. I…" My brows arch. "I might have a surprise for you."

She stares. "A surprise other than *you* cooking?"

“You miss a lot when you move halfway around the world, kid. And yes, another surprise.”

“What is it?”

“*It* is not an *it*. That’s your only clue.”

She looks puzzled for a moment, then her eyes widen. “Wait, a woman?!”

I grin.

“Get the fuck out!!” she shrieks. “*Really*? Who is she?!”

I chuckle. “You’ll meet her tonight. Sooner, actually.”

“Holy *shit*!” she squeals. “Okay, I’m going to go shower off that long-ass flight and get changed—she’s coming *here*?!”

I nod and she squeals again.

“This is batshit crazy! *You*, in a relationship!!” She laughs, giving me another hug. “Okay, I’ll be back and cleaned up soon. I can’t wait to meet this woman!”

Freya darts out of my office and I walk over to the bar cart and pour a drink, smiling. I bring it back to the desk and start going through notes from Isaak about some of our interests around the city. Then I get sucked into a black hole regarding the finer points of a business venture he wants us to get involved in with the Drakos Greek mafia family.

The door to my office bangs open again. I glance up, frowning when Freya comes bolting into the room with a robe tied around her, looking totally freaked out.

“The fuck?” I growl, lurching from my chair.

“Some girl!” she blurts. “She just barged into my room and then ran out in hysterics!”

Fucking FUCK.

“Exactly which guest room did you put yourself in?” I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“The awesome one, of course!” she blurts. “The big one with the walk-in closet and sick bathroom!”

Shit.

“Who the *fuck* was that—”

“*That*,” I growl. “Is who I was going to introduce you to tonight.”

Freya’s eyes bulge. “She’s—wait. *Her*?” She blinks, then slowly raises a suspicious eyebrow. “How old is she?”

Here we go. “Twenty-three.”

Freya stares at me for a beat, then lets out a low whistle. “Well. I *was* going to make a joke about daddy issues, but…”

I glare at her. “It’s *not* like that.”

She holds up a hand. “Okay. Okay. I’m just…” She frowns. “She’s *young*, Kir. I’m not judging, I—”

“Her age is not the reason I care about her. It's not a fetishized attraction. And if you think that’s the sort of man I am—”

“I don’t.” She says it boldly, without hesitation. “I really don’t, at all.” A small smile twists the corners of her lips. “Did you just say you *care* about her?”

I shoot her a look. “I did.”

“Like…*care*-care?”

“I’ve told her about Zavolzhsky.”

Freya’s brows shoot up. “*Woah*.”

I should mention that *no one* knows about my years spent in the Siberian penal camp. Even Annika and Damian only know parts. Freya arguably knows the most, but it's on par with what I’ve told Brooklyn.

“She’s something I didn’t expect, Freya,” I growl quietly.

She nods. Then her face scrunches as she looks down. “*Fuuuck*.”

“What?”

“She, uh…” Freya looks up at me sheepishly. “She *may* have the wrong idea about your and my relationship…”

My brow furrows. “Why the fuck would that be?”

Freya winces. “She *may* have walked in on me taking selfies in lingerie?”

My mouth sours. “Why the *fuck* were you doing that?”

“Because my husband is seven thousand miles away!” she retorts. “And I didn’t exactly expect your *girlfriend* to just barge—Kir?!”

“Stay here!” I snap. “And put some goddamn clothes on!”

It doesn’t take me long to realize that A, Brooklyn is no longer in the house, B, Matvey’s Range Rover is gone, and C, he isn’t answering his phone.

I admire how assiduously he follows my “when she’s with you, think of her as me” order when he's driving Brooklyn around. But I’m guessing that right now, she’s telling him not to answer my goddamn calls, because she barged in on Freya taking spicy pictures for Mal, and completely misinterpreted it, and she’s trying to dodge me now.

Unluckily for her, there's that tracking device in her phone.

I jump behind the wheel of the Aston Martin and roar down the drive.

It’s a mix of emotions as I drive toward Midtown. On the one hand, I’m annoyed about the situation and pissed that Brooklyn would automatically assume the worst and run off like this. But on the other hand?

A slight smile tweaks my mouth.

On the other hand, part of me has wondered—okay, dreaded—that what I feel for this woman is not necessarily reciprocated. To me, she’s something I never saw coming, and yet has become my everything. But maybe to *her*, I’m merely a bit of fun—a rich, powerful older man who plucked her out of her miserable life and lavished her with gifts.

I know that’s not really the case. But it’s been at least partly there, lurking in the back of my mind.

That said…her running out in tears, fleeing the house, actively ignoring my calls *and* telling Matvey to do the same brings a strange smile to my face as I follow her location to the bar in Midtown.

Not because she's hurting, but because it means she *does* feel what I feel.

I tell the valet outside to keep it running before I head in. She's not in the main bar or the lounge, so I take the stairs up to the rooftop bar.

Which is precisely when the gates of Hell open inside me, and pure wrath and fury thunder through them and out into the world.

Because I see Brooklyn, across the crowded rooftop bar, sitting at a table.

…*Being kissed*.

It doesn't matter that she instantly pulls back with a frown. It doesn't matter that the fucking guy hangs his head, clearly mouthing an apology to her, a pleading look in his eyes.

It doesn't even matter that as I get closer, shoving my way through the crowd, I realize the asshat who just kissed *my* girl on the fucking mouth is *Roman Nikitin*.

He's a fucking *dead man*.

My vision is a violent riot of pitch black and blood red when I grab Roman by the neck, rip him off his chair, and send him crashing to the ground. I'm on him in a second, snarling into his face before I bloody his nose with my fist.

He and I have danced this dance before, in the underground ring. But this is no boxing match.

This is me killing him with my bare hands.

My fists rain down on him, smashing his mouth, his eye sockets, trying to *destroy* his pretty-boy face. He snarls, shoving me off him enough to stagger bleeding to his feet, a look of pure violence on his face.

"You're fucking *dead*, motherfucker," he snarls as he lunges at me. We go crashing into a table, a crowd forming around us. Someone is screaming.

All I can see is this fucker kissing Brooklyn, and all I want is to smash his fucking brains in.

"*STOP IT!!*"

The two of us jerk to a stop when Brooklyn lunges between us. She whirls on the motherfucker first, shoving him back.

"*Enough*, Roman!!" she spits at him. Just as the smug smile spreads over my face, she whirls on me, too. "And *you*!" she barks. "*STOP! IT*!"

"We're not fucking done here," I snarl.

"Ready *anytime*, old man!" he roars back.

My hands curl to fists. I make a move toward him, but suddenly, there's a flurry of blonde hair, blue eyes, and small, firm hands pressing at my chest.

"*Please*," Brooklyn says, her eyes locked with mine. "Enough, *please*."

"For *you*?" I hiss quietly. "Yes. For *now*, yes."

She exhales, her shoulders sagging. But then my arm shoots out, grabbing her hand tightly in mine.

"But I haven't even *started* with you."

She chokes on her breath as I storm out of the bar, pulling her after me.

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34

BROOKLYN

RAW ENERGY RIPPLES through my body, starting where his hand grips mine like a vice. It crackles like the sky right before thunder explodes, electrifying my skin, making the hair on the nape of my neck stand up, and sending my heart rate out of control.

Kir barrels down the stairs of the restaurant, my breath coming faster as we surge out onto the sidewalk toward his idling car.

“Kir—”

“Get in.”

There’s a cold, leaden, almost *deathly* tone to his voice. And the fucked-up thing is, as terrifying as it is, and as much as it chills me, it also makes my core throb and *riot* with pure desire.

“Kir, *please*,” I gasp, tugging on his arm. “Wait. Let me just explain—”

“*Get in the fucking car, Brooklyn*,” he rasps, whirling on me with fury in his face that does the same thing to me that his voice did a second ago.

Terrifies me.

Turns me on.

Kir grabs the keys from the valet and yanks open the passenger door of the Aston Martin.

“*Now*,” he seethes, his voice like ice and iron.

Wordlessly, I slip into the car. He slams the door shut and marches around to the other side before slipping in next to me. The engine roars, and I hastily buckle my seatbelt as we peel away from the curb and into the neon New York night.

“Roman is just a friend,” I whisper, my pulse still racing. My hands twist in my lap, picking at the yoga pants I’m wearing.

“I have friends, Brooklyn,” he growls. “And I don’t fucking *kiss them*.”

“I *didn’t* kiss him!” I spit. “*He* kissed *me*! Besides, he’s just confused because he…because he’s probably…”

Too much information.

Whatever my thoughts are surrounding Roman’s conflicted sexual identity, that is *not* mine to share, even with Kir. Even with this big misunderstanding.

Just as I’m feeling like the world’s biggest asshole for what Kir just saw, even if it wasn’t my fault at *all*, another visual charges back into my head with a vengeance. I turn to glare at him.

“And while we’re levelling accusations at each other,” I hiss, “let’s talk about the fucking *girl* in my room, prancing around in fucking *lingerie* and taking selfies for you!!” I relish the way his jaw tightens. “*Fuck you* for following me. How *dare* you give *me* shit for someone else trying to kiss me, when you’ve apparently got free rein to bring home whatever slut you want—”

“She’s my daughter.”

All the fight in me instantly snuffs out. I go silent and still, my breath coming quick, my eyes widening as I stare haggardly at him.

“I…your…” A cold feeling ripples down my spine. “*Daughter*…?”

Suddenly, I’m not sure which makes me feel shittier—him bringing home some random girl to fuck, or him having a *daughter*. Because that means that the man I’m fucking crazy about, and can’t stop touching or thinking about, *had this before with someone else*.

Much more than “this”, actually. And *God*, does that sting.

We drive in total silence, me feeling smaller and smaller until we come to a stop in the gravel drive by the back door of his house.

“Her name is Freya,” Kir says quietly. “She lives with her husband—that's who she was taking selfies for—in Japan, and she surprised me by dropping by unannounced while she’s here in the city for work.”

The cringe that twists inside me cannot actually be measured.

Kir turns off the engine and gets out of the car. He walks around to my side and opens the door for me. My face twists as I look up at him miserably.

“Kir—”

“Come with me.”

“I’m sorry. For running out, for what you saw—”

“*Come with me*,” he growls, taking my hand and helping me from the car.

Freya’s *clothed* and typing on her phone when we step into the kitchen. She looks up, her eyes locking with mine as she smiles apologetically.

“That was my bad,” she blurts. “I’m *so* sorry—”

“No, please,” I wince. “I’m the one who totally walked in on you. It’s *your* house, after all.”

She shakes her head. “Nah, it’s this guy’s.”

I smile wryly. “I think you’ve got more right to be in it than I—”

“I’m gonna stop you right there,” she says, sighing as she walks over to me. “Can we try this again?”

“*Please God, yes*,” I groan.

“Hi. I'm Freya,” she grins, sticking out a hand. I laugh nervously as I take it.

“Brooklyn.”

“Well, Brooklyn…” She winks at me as she leans close. “He’s never run after *anyone* like he ran after you.” Her brows arch. “So, I do know what I’m talking about when I say that *you* are the one who has the right to be here.”

Kir clears his throat slightly behind me. “Also, perhaps we could get in the habit of *locking doors*?”

Freya groans. “Hey, at least it wasn’t *you* who walked in.”

I glance back and giggle when I see the sour expression on Kir’s face. Then I turn back to Freya, and frown when I see the suitcase sitting next to her.

“Wait, you’re not leaving, are you?”

She shrugs. “*Yeah*. There's a couple of hotels in Manhattan that I love to stay at when I’m in town.”

I shake my head. “Seriously, stay. *Please*. Me making you leave your own house is possibly the worst first impression I could think of.”

“Preaching to the choir, girl,” she giggles. “The first impression I gave you was my *tits*, for fuck’s sake.”

I laugh, but Kir groans behind me.

“Could. We. *Not*,” he grumbles tightly.

I look pleadingly at Freya. “Seriously. Stay, really.”

She shakes her head. “Honestly, I get my best work done at hotels. Plus, I’m a night owl.” She shrugs. “I’d be that weird chick roaming around the house at two in the morning while you two are trying to sleep—or, you know, whatever.”

“I’m begging you,” I say. “*Please*—”

Freya grins. “You’re not kicking me out. Seriously. I just wanted to stop by and say hi.” She shrugs, winking at me. “Meeting you was just an added bonus.”

“Okay, if I can’t convince you to stay the night, would you at least stay for dinner?” I offer.

Freya cocks a brow and sucks her teeth. “*Well.*..big guy here *did* offer to cook.”

I twist to look at Kir curiously. “*You* cook?”

Freya snorts a laugh that draws a stern glare from her dad. “I…” He clears his throat. “Technically speaking, yes.”

Freya hoots another laugh.

* * *

IN THE END, we wind up ordering in Thai food and eating together in the kitchen. Freya is *awesome*, hilarious, and a total badass. She also never makes it weird when Kir puts his arm around me or brushes my hair aside to kiss my ear.

She briefly gives me the rundown on their story: how she and her best friend Annika worked for Kir for years, so close they were practically family, before they realized they actually *were* family.

She also very gracefully omits anything about who her mother was, or what that woman’s relationship was with Kir. Which I could hug her for.

It doesn’t stop my mind from rampaging through every horrible made-up scenario, though…Kir pining over a long-lost love…never dating anyone because nobody, including me, will live up to this woman from his past…I find myself wondering if I remind him of her. If I *look* like her.

My stomach churns, and I try to shove those thoughts away and instead focus on how nice of a time I’m having, and how amazing Freya is. Eventually, she gets ready to leave, giving Kir a big hug and me an even bigger one.

“It was *lovely* to meet you, Brooklyn,” she grins. “And thanks for keeping this one on his best behavior.” She jerks a thumb at Kir.

I laugh. “I’m not sure I’ve got anything to do with that.”

“Agree to disagree,” she winks before turning to her dad. “Hey—don’t fuck this up, okay?”

“Good *night*, Freya,” he growls, making her laugh before she gives him one last hug.

We stand in the driveway, watching her drive the totally badass black Lambo with the pink skull out through the gates. Kir’s fingers entwine with mine as he pulls me around to face him.

My cheeks burn as I drag my gaze to his, still a little mortified about everything earlier.

“I…*may* have overreacted,” I mumble. “About Freya, I mean.”

“You mean fleeing the house and convincing Matvey not to answer my calls?” His brow darkens. “He and I are going to have a serious talk—”

“Don’t take it out on him,” I laugh, poking his chest. “Besides, isn't he supposed to follow my orders as if I’m you?”

He scowls. “Not exactly. And I *do* outrank you.”

“Huh,” I shrug. “Maybe he just likes me better.”

Kir’s eyes darken, and I giggle as I lean up on tiptoe to kiss him softly. Before I can pull back, his arms wrap around me, his hand sliding into my hair. He pulls me back in, kissing me long and slow and deep, stealing the air from my lungs and making my knees weak.

“Come with me,” he murmurs. “We’re not quite finished with before.”

I shiver, letting him lead me through the house. He takes me upstairs to a massive library that I *love*, especially because of the big ivy-covered stone veranda off it, looking over the grounds to Manhattan beyond.

Kir sits in one of patio chairs by the table. When I go to sit across from him, he pulls me into him, slides me onto his knee, and turns me to face him. It's weirdly comforting and safe, sitting on his lap like this.

“I’m so sorry you saw Roman kiss me.” It just pops out. “I’m sorry he kissed me at *all*. He’s…” My brow furrows. “There’s some stuff in his life

that isn’t my place to tell. But that kiss—”

“I know a last-ditch effort at convincing yourself of something when I see it,” Kir says quietly, his eyes piercing mine. “And while I have *not* forgiven him for touching what’s *mine*—”

I gasp as he cups my jaw tightly, holding it in place with two fingers as he leans in and kisses me again.

“And while *Roman* and I might not be done talking about it…you and I, however, are.” He shakes his head. “You have nothing to apologize for. Nothing at all.”

He takes a slow breath and exhales, wrapping his other arm around my waist.

“Ask me.”

My brow knits. “Ask you?”

“It’s been all over your face since I told you she was my daughter, all through dinner. Freya was good enough not to mention it. But now is your time, Brooklyn.” He levels a gaze at me. “Ask me what you want to ask. I’ll answer as best I can.”

“*I’m afraid to*,” I whisper.

He cups my cheek. “You have nothing to fear, babygirl. But if you don’t ask, it’ll fester, and I won’t have that. So, please—ask.”

My gaze drops as I take a shaky breath. “Who is she?” My teeth drag across my bottom lip. “Freya’s mother, I mean.”

“Her name was Petra Lindqvist,” he says quietly.

Was.

I wince, dragging my gaze up to his.

“I was barely eighteen,” Kir continues. “Fresh out of boarding school, on my way to Oxford, and starting to lay the foundation of what would become this empire. Her husband, William, was vile. But I was young and hungry,

and I knew what I wanted would involve doing business with people like him, at least at first."

He takes another breath, looking out over the grounds.

"I'm not proud of the brief relationship I had with a married woman," he says quietly. "I've done some terrible things in my life, Brooklyn, but even with how bad William was…" He shakes his head. "That one stands out."

I look down, biting my lip so hard that I taste copper for a second. I don't want to ask this next question, but not knowing the answer is killing me inside.

"Did you…" I squeeze my eyes shut. "Did you love—"

"*No*."

The answer comes fast and earnest, and it's like oxygen to my gasping lungs. My eyes instantly lift to his, my pulse quickening.

"*Not at all*." He shakes his head. "She was trying to escape William. I was trying to escape the horrors of my past. It was very brief, and then it was over."

"You said her name *was* Petra…"

He nods. "She passed away a few years later. But in the meantime…"

My mouth twists. "Freya?"

He nods. "I didn't know, obviously. Twenty-odd years later, my nephew Damian introduced me to two professional thieves he'd made friends with: an expert lock picker and pickpocket, and a world-class hacker." He smirks. "That would be Freya, if it wasn't abundantly obvious from the whole *Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* aesthetic she does *so* love to lean in to."

"When did you find out she was…you know…"

"About a year ago."

We both go silent for a few seconds.

"Are there…" I frown. "I mean, is Freya your only—"

He cups my face, shaking his head as his eyes lock with mine. “To set the record straight, I *don’t* date much. I *don’t* see woman casually, and I have *not* fathered any other surprise children, I can promise you that.”

I smile, biting my lip as my cheeks heat.

“I don’t *love* the idea of you with her…” I frown. “Freya’s mother, I mean. Sorry, that’s shitty. But I mean…you know…”

He shakes his head. “It’s not shitty.”

“Yeah, because petty jealousy is *so* attractive,” I sigh.

He smirks. “Perhaps you missed *my* display of *petty jealousy* earlier, played out on Roman Nikitin’s face.”

I snort. “*That* was you being petty jealous?”

Kir shrugs. “Maybe slightly more than petty.”

“Yeah, *a bit,*” I giggle. I lock eyes with him as I twist on his lap so that I’m facing him with my legs around his waist. “I *am* sorry, though.”

Kir shakes his head. “I already told you, you have—”

“Not for the Roman thing,” I say quickly. “Well, I mean, *also* for that.” I give him a sad look. “I mean for me being a total psycho, acting like a brat, and running out of the house.”

He flashes a dark, slightly predatory smile that makes my pulse skip. “Well, if you *insist* on apologizing for it, I know a way you can do that.”

He brushes the hair away from my neck and leans in, teasing his lips over my skin before nibbling at my earlobe.

“*On your knees,* bound, saying *please, sir*,” he murmurs darkly.

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35

BROOKLYN

"THE FUCK ARE YOU GRINNING ABOUT?"

I startle from my position on the studio floor, quickly glancing up at Val.

"Hmm? Nothing," I blurt.

He smirks, his brow furrowing as he peers at me…no, *past me*.

"Who's *BDE*?"

I frown. "Wha—" I feel the color surge into my face before I quickly fumble to turn my phone over as Val hoots with laughter.

"Pro tip: if you're gonna look at dick pics at work, don't do it with your back to a mirrored wall."

I groan, glancing back quickly at the wall of the studio I'm leaning against —mirrored, obviously—before turning back to him.

"I wasn't looking at *dicks*, weirdo. But you already know that," I mutter. "I was just texting a friend. Chill."

His brow cocks. "A friend with the initials *BDE*?" He snickers. "Don't insult my intelligence. We both know that's your guy."

I inhale deeply, trying to will the heat from my face. "Why do you say—"

"BDE," he chuckles. "As in Big Dick Energy."

I groan.

Val barrels on mercilessly. "*Wow*, you know who would be devastated if he saw you naming your new guy BDE? I mean, if he knew we called him BDE in the first place?"

I cringe, already knowing what he's going to say. "Val—"

"Kir," he sighs. "As in, the *gold standard* for Big Dick Energy." He flashes a grin, shaking his head. "You're seriously telling me whoever you're fucking warrants the name more than *that* guy?"

No, I want to tell him. *You're right. There's no man on Earth who warrants the nickname "BDE" more than Kir*.

Obviously, I won't be telling Val who "BDE" is in my phone. It's not because I'm embarrassed about my relationship with Kir, or the age difference, or what he does for a living. The problem is that I dance for the Zakharova, which Kir *owns*.

But luckily, I'm saved from continuing the conversation when Madame Kuzmina sweeps into the studio, black skirts and shawls streaming behind her like raven wings. She clasps her ringed fingers together and fixes us with a stern look.

"We'll be moving out to the stage for the last two hours of rehearsal," she says matter-of-factly. "We have an important guest who would like to sit in."

I glance at Val, then at Evelina, Milena, and Naomi, sitting and stretching. They just shrug, as confused as I am.

"*Now*, ladies and gentlemen," Kuzmina says sharply, turning on her heel and marching back out.

We all follow her out onto the stage, clustering in small groups while we await what comes next.

Madame Kuzmina smiles her usual pointed, slightly venomous smile at us. "I'm sure you all know Mr. Nikolayev?"

My pulse skips as she turns, gesturing with one glittering ringed finger at a figure in a dark suit who materializes out of the shadows beyond the stage.

A figure with piercing, dark devil eyes, which have landed right on me. A figure who sends a wolfish, hungry grin my way before he subtly lets his tongue drag over his bottom lip.

Heat *explodes* in my face as achy need coils in my core.

Those very eyes were looking up at me this morning from between my spread legs as I perched on the edge of the kitchen island. Those very lips were wrapped around my clit as he tongued me to an explosive orgasm.

“I’m not here, of course,” Kir smiles easily at the company, dipping his chin. “I was merely in the neighborhood and wanted to take in a bit of your talents.”

Val nudges me in the ribs, bringing his head down toward me.

“Fuckin *huge* dick energy,” he murmurs under his breath. “I don’t care who BDE is. There’s no *way* he can match HDE over here.”

I groan to myself, feeling my face throb.

…Remembering the way Kir put me on my knees right after the aforementioned “lips on pussy” situation this morning and fucked my mouth with his huge cock until he came down my throat.

I know he’s not here to “take in a bit of our talents” this afternoon.

It’s to look me in the eye, just like he is right now, and remind me what happens to brats. Because *I purposefully WAS one* earlier today.

In living with this man, I’ve started to learn some of his habits. For instance, he *always* finishes everything on his plate, no matter how much food it is. I’d guess it's probably a holdover from being in a fucking Russian prison camp as a kid, and food not being guaranteed. How he maintains his athletic, chiseled physique is beyond me.

He also has this OCD way of “fixing” everything in front of him—making sure the silverware and napkin are *just so* when he sits down for dinner, or

that his laptop, pens, and documents are positioned *exactly* the right way on his desk.

Another thing I've noticed is that when he's got an important meeting, he makes a point to wear what I've realized are clearly a pair of "lucky" socks —very soft, black, with the initials "K. N." embroidered on the ankle above a small skull.

Also when an important meeting is on the docket, he has this thing where he makes sure there's *nothing* extra on his person, and that he's only carrying what he absolutely needs. I've watched him take a *pen* out of his pocket, or a receipt. Like just having them there are a distraction.

So today, since I was trying to be a brat, I fucked with him twice. First, I took those socks and hid them. And second, I left something stashed in his jacket pocket that I *know* he discovered in the middle of his meeting.

The image of Kir holding court at a boardroom table and finding a lacy pink thong of mine in his pocket is both amusing and more than a little arousing.

As to why he's here, that would be because of the socks and the panties, of course. But *also,* when he texted me earlier telling me he was going to "turn my ass red" over my shenanigans, I replied with a pic of my bare butt I snapped in the changing room along with the message "this ass?"

I didn't get a reply to that one.

Until now.

Madame Kuzmina has us set up for the various bits we've been rehearsing. As I get into position, I keep glancing over to where Kir is sitting in the center of the third row, one ankle crossed over the opposite knee, his arms spread casually across the backs of the adjacent seats.

His eyes never *once* leave me during the next two hours. I can feel his gaze sliding over my skin. Teasing the back of my neck or the small of my back as I dance, peeling my leotard and tights away and feasting on every inch of me.

By the time Madama Kuzmina has finished torturing us, I'm panting, my body exhausted and spent. But the heat he ignites between my legs is still

there. The skipped pulse when I glance over and see his dark devil eyes remains, too.

Everyone starts to leave the stage to head back to the changing rooms. Then I glance back at Kir one more time, my breath catches, and I'm instantly rooted to the spot.

His dark eyes lance into mine. And slowly, almost imperceptibly, he shakes his head side to side.

"I think I'm going to stick around. Maybe get some lifting in downstairs," I say casually to Val and Evelina. Evie looks at me like I've grown a second head.

"*Seriously*?" she blurts. "After *that* sucky rehearsal?"

Val frowns. "Are you fucking high? That was *brutal* today. You can appreciate the severity of the situation with Evie using the word *sucky*, which is basically her way of saying 'fuck this fuck-ass shit'."

Poor Evelina turns pink as she rolls her eyes. "Jerk."

"See?" Val sighs. "You're turning her into a real potty mouth here."

I laugh as I punch him in the arm. "Don't be a dick."

"*Speaking of*," he says, waggling his eyebrows. "You were in the middle of telling me about your new guy earlier before Madame Sadism so rudely interrupted."

Eveline turns, arching her brows at me. "Are you dating someone?!"

"*No*," I growl, glaring daggers at Val.

"Not dating. Just fucking," he shrugs.

"*I am not*!" I hiss.

"Well, you're *totally* sleeping with someone. So which is it? Are you dating BDE or just banging him?"

"Wait. Who's BDE?" Evelina frowns.

“Brooklyn’s new boyfriend.”

“I do *not* have a—”

“Sorry. Rich fuck buddy.”

“*Val*!” I mutter.

Evelina’s brow furrows. “I'm lost. What does BDE stand for?”

I groan as Val grins, like he’s about to descend from the mountain with man’s first fire.

“The B is for big,” he starts.

“*Val*,” I sigh. “Spare her? Please?”

“You guys realize I’m not *that* sheltered, right?” Evelina pouts.

“Oh, but honey…” I smile, putting an arm around her. “You *are*.”

Val cracks up while she *harrumphs* dramatically, pouting. “Will you just freaking tell me what it means?”

“*Big Dick Energy, baby*,” Val crows.

Evie frowns. “Okay, what does *that* even mean—”

“*Kir*,” Val sighs. “If you’re trying to figure it out, just think of our boss.”

I groan on the inside. Evie’s brows knit as she valiantly tries to put it together. Suddenly, her face lights up.

“Ohhhh!” she giggles, blushing deeply. “I think I get it!”

“Atta girl,” Val grins, patting her head.

I will the heat from my face. “Well, this has been educational. I’m going to go stretch and then get some lifting in.”

“Say hi to *BDE* for us!” Evie blurts, giggling as the two of them amble into the wings toward the dressing rooms.

Madame Kuzmina materializes next to me, eying me curiously, clearly wondering why I’m still here.

“I—I was going to stretch and get some weight training in,” I explain quickly.

“Do you need the lights on?”

I shake my head. She eyes me keenly.

“Good work today,” she says. “You’re becoming a much stronger dancer.”

“Thank you,” I smile at her.

Oddly enough, she smiles back. “Ivan Yelchin would be a fool not to take you. But, I will say, we’ll miss you here when you’re gone.”

When my eyes go wide with shock, she just smiles quietly.

“The ballet world is a small world, Brooklyn.”

“Madame, I was going to tell—”

“You don’t owe me anything,” she says with an arch of her brow. “And I take nothing personal about you auditioning with a *very* fine company.”

I smile wryly. “I appreciate that. Really. And look, I *love* the Zakharova—”

“You really don’t need to explain it to me, of all people,” she says with a stern, knowing look. “Ivan and the *Imperiya Korona* would be lucky to get you.”

My smile twists. “I…*thank you*, Madame,” I say quietly.

She nods her chin. “Make sure the door locks behind you when you leave.”

She drifts off into the shadows, and I hear the door to the backstage area open and shut.

I’m alone.

With *him*.

I take a shaky breath, biting my lip as I slowly turn to where he’s still sitting in the third row, dead center. I’m suddenly aware that Val, Evie and I weren’t exactly talking *quietly*, and I’m wondering exactly how much he heard from over there.

“BDE, hmm?”

Well, there's my answer.

He draws in a slow breath, not moving from his seat as he raises his hand and *beckons* with two fingers.

“Come here.”

Heat pools between my legs, my insides tightening with hunger and need.

Yeah, this is *exactly* what BDE is: the fact that this man can just sit there looking like fucking sin and *beckon* me with two fingers.

…And the fact that I do as I’m told when he does it.

I crouch down and slide off the lip of the stage into the auditorium. Arousal slithers and snakes through my body, pebbling my nipples against my leotard and making my thighs rub together as I walk up the aisle to the third row, then slip down it, until I’m standing in front of him.

“*Hi*,” I say quietly, biting my lip.

Kir cocks a brow, leveling a dark look at me.

“My *socks*…” he growls.

I grin in spite of myself, feeling my face heat. “In my underwear drawer back at the house,” I say. “How did your meeting—”

I gasp as his hand slides to the back of my thigh, gripping tightly before it drags higher to my ass.

“I didn’t realize that I had *such a little brat* living under my roof.”

Fire curls and licks hungrily inside me. My breath catches as I feel his hand grabbing my ass tighter, his fingers sinking deep into my flesh.

“I’m sorry, *sir*,” I whisper hoarsely. “I don’t know what—”

“Pull your tights and leotard down.”

I shiver, my breath catching as raw need coils and tightens in my stomach. I swallow, nervously glancing around the dark auditorium, lit only by a few

dim stage lights.

Standing here talking to him this close is dangerous enough. But…*that*?

“Kir—”

“I said pull your fucking tights and leotard down, little sinner,” he murmurs darkly. “To your knees.”

I jolt, gasping when his hand rears back and gives me a little smack on the ass.

“*Now*.”

My eyes bulge as I look at him in shock.

“*What*?!” I hiss quietly. “*Kir, I’ll be naked—*”

“Yes, I suppose you will.”

His eyes lock with mine, his lips curling dangerously in the corners.

My body trembles and shifts, my thighs squeezing together and my blood pumping like fire through my veins.

“I said *now*, little sinner,” he murmurs.

I take a shaky breath, looking right at him as I reach up and pull one of the spaghetti straps of my leotard down over my shoulder. I do the same on the other side, and then slowly peel it down my body, over my chest. Kir’s eyes drag hungrily over my breasts and nipples, making the heat in my core coil even tighter. I push the material down my torso, then over my hips, my face exploding with heat as I shimmy a little to get it down my thighs to my knees. Then I hook my thumbs into the waistband of my tights and do the same with them.

I tremble, hugging my nakedness as I stand there in the middle of the third row back from stage, my skin throbbing under his gaze.

“Lie across my knees. Face down.”

My heart thunders in my chest, rattling in my ears as my pulse goes off the rails. I swallow heavily, my body humming with need.

He sits back in his chair, spreading his arms casually across the backs of the seats on either side. He takes a calm breath before looking at my eyes, wide and trembling, but eager.

“*Now*, little sinner.”

My pulse is pounding so hard as to make my body shiver as I lower myself down and bend across his lap. My nipples drag over his trousers, my midsection pressed to his muscled thighs.

I jump when I feel his hands touch me—one tracing between my shoulder blades, the other resting on my ass. He teases his fingers over the cheeks in slow, deliberate circles, making my core clench with aching need as heat floods between my thighs.

“Oh, and I almost forgot.”

He shifts, removing his hand from my shoulder to reach into his jacket.

“I believe you left something of yours in my suit pocket this morning.”

My eyes go wide, cheeks flaming as he dangles the pink thong from his fingertip, right in front of my face.

“Open your mouth.”

A low, throaty moan builds inside me.

“*Open. Your. Mouth*.”

I do, even knowing what’s coming. I whimper when he stuffs the lacy thong between my lips like a gag before sliding his hand back and twisting it in my hair.

“You’re going to count to *twenty*,” he murmurs darkly.

I mumble through the lace that I can’t talk clearly with my panties in my mouth. Kir’s eye glint as he smiles at me.

“Just do your best,” he murmurs.

His hand strokes my butt again, sending a ripple up my spine. When the hand slowly pulls away from me, I tense, waiting.

Then his palm cracks *hard* across my ass, making me scream into the panties.

"*ONE*!" I squeal, the word muffled and unrecognizable.

His hand comes down on the other cheek next, sending bolts of pain mixed with heated pleasure rippling through me.

"*TWO*!"

Slowly, I start to descend into delicious darkness, hearing every sharp smack of his palm against my upturned ass, feeling every heated shiver as the punishment for my bratty behavior radiates through my core.

By seven, I'm squirming in his lap—both from the sting of his palm and the throbbing, needy wetness he creates between my legs with every smack.

By twelve, I'm shaking. When I choke out thirteen, I'm grinding against his thigh shamelessly, aching for him as he punishes my ass one cheek at a time, back and forth. Pain ripples through me mixed with a craving for his brutal control that has my knees weak and my core clenching.

He punctuates number sixteen by slipping his hand between my legs. I moan shamelessly, pushing back on him, desperate to feel his fingers inside me.

Kir chuckles darkly, quietly.

"*Greedy* little sinner," he rumbles. "Already wanting my fingers, aren't you."

I moan, shuddering with pleasure. "*Yes, sir*…" I choke into the panties.

Seventeen is a brutal one, making me cry out as the sharp sting of his hand radiates through my body.

On nineteen, I'm aware of the *huge* bulge pulsing against my stomach as he brutalizes my poor ass. His hand kneads my tender skin, his cock tensing and straining against me.

"*TWENTY!*" I cry out.

He's already moving me before I can even catch my breath.

He yanks me up and spins me around, pulling my back to his chest as I tumble into his lap. His hands are all over me, cupping my breasts from behind, rolling my hard nipples between his fingers.

His lips drag over my neck, his teeth raking the skin as a low rumble teases through my ear.

"*Take out my cock, babygirl*."

I whimper as I slowly ease up from his lap and reach behind me, fumbling with his belt, then the button of his trousers, then the zipper. My pulse skips when I reach inside, moaning quietly as my fingers find his *thick* cock.

I pull him out, my breath turning shaky and ragged as I slowly pump my small hand up and down him.

Fuuuck.

He's *so* big.

Kir positions his legs on either side of mine and then eases me back. I moan, shaking when I feel the hard, hot, swollen head of his cock tease against my lips.

"Just like that, babygirl," he growls quietly. His hips roll, and I whimper when I feel his big dick slowly sliding between my lips. "Sit back on it," he murmurs. "I want to watch your pretty cunt swallow my cock."

Moans fall from my lips as I push back, gasping quietly as I feel him open me up. Pleasure and heat throb inside me as I slowly sink down onto his cock.

"All the way," he murmurs. "I want your greedy cunt to swallow every fucking inch of me. I know you can take it."

He groans deeply, grabbing a fist of my hair and rolling his hips into me as I slide back on him, taking more and more of his beautiful cock inside.

"You're doing so well, babygirl," Kir rasps darkly into my ear. His arms circle me, his hands cupping my breasts and toying with my aching nipples as I start to sink down onto him more. "Taking my cock like such a good girl."

Pleasure hums and ripples through me, all those “good girls” just *melting* me. I keep lowering myself down, whining with need as I feel every inch of him push into me, stretching me wider and wider, my eyes rolling back in my head.

When my ass is finally nestled against his hips, his big cock buried to the hilt inside me, I take a shaky breath. Kir groans, twitching and pulsing deep inside me. I swear I can feel him in my *stomach* as I grind on his dick, moaning, my pussy dripping and leaking all over him.

“Such a good girl,” he growls into my ear. “That’s it. Grind on that big fucking cock. Let me feel that messy little cunt squeeze and strangle my dick, babygirl.”

I moan into the panties stuffed into my mouth when he tugs on my hair. He grabs my sore ass, gripping it possessively as he slides me up every thick inch of his cock until just the swollen head is inside, leaking precum into me.

“Now show me how good girls ride cock.”

I whine a low moan of pleasure into the lace as I sink back down onto him. *Fuck*, it’s such a tight fit as his thick cock slides into me. I rise up again, my muscles clenching and my pussy rippling around him as I start to ride his gorgeous dick.

I cry out when his open palm smacks my ass. Kir growls, tugging my hair sharply enough to make me moan as he grinds deep into me.

“That’s it,” he rasps, guiding me up and down every inch of his fat cock with one hand on my ass and the other tugging my hair. “*Strangle* my fucking dick with your tight little pussy. Rub that messy cunt all *over* me.”

I’m drooling and whimpering into the panties in my mouth as I start to ride him faster, taking every inch—never mind my stomach, I swear I can feel him in my *throat*. He spanks my ass, pulls my hair, and reaches around to twist and tug my nipples until I’m shaking wildly on his lap as I ride him.

His hips start to pound and I lose all control, falling back against his chest as he fucks up into me. His hands run down my thighs, squeezing and pinning them together as he rams his gorgeous cock into me over and over.

“Keep riding that cock, babygirl,” he growls into my ear, making me scream in pleasure when he pinches and rolls my nipple. “Make a fucking *mess* for me,” he grunts. “Bounce on that big fucking cock. Let me feel your pretty cunt strangle my fucking dick. And when you’re done coming on it, you’re going to be a good girl and clean it off with your tongue.”

Sweet fucking God.

Something snaps inside me. It’s the mix of his ultra-possessive darkness and the soothing, comforting praise—the “good girls”, the way his fingers stroke my skin. The way he’s both completely dominating in an “I’m going to break you in half” kind of way but also holds me like I’m something to be cherished.

I moan when he pushes my knees tighter together and lifts them, folding me in half as he keeps me there and fucks up into me. The wet, slick sound of his gorgeous, big cock ramming into my pussy fills my ears, mixing with my own whimpered, gagged moans and his ultra-masculine groans of pleasure.

His hand slides up to my throat, and when his fingers wrap tight around my windpipe, the world starts to blur at the edges.

“There you go, babygirl,” he rasps low in my ear. “*Squeeze* that fucking cock. I can feel this needy little cunt clenching around me. Are you going to come now? Are you going to be good girl and make a mess of my fat fucking cock?”

I scream into the soaked panties as he fucks up into me, pounding me like a rag doll with deep, violent thrusts that have me clawing at the edges of my sanity.

His mouth brushes my ear, his teeth biting down on the lobe, and my whole body begins to shake.

“Don’t stop now, babygirl,” he growls. “You’re so fucking close. I can feel every fucking twitch of this pretty pussy, every desperate squeeze. You’re not hiding anything from me, little sinner. So let this pretty cunt come all over my fucking cock, so I can fill you with my cum.”

My entire reality blurs and spasms as the orgasm crashes into me. I cry out into the gag, shuddering and coming apart at the seams as I *explode* on his cock. A tidal wave of pleasure rips through me, sucking the air from my lungs as my walls squeeze and clench his huge dick.

Kir groans, biting my neck sharply as his hand squeezes my throat. His cock swells inside me, and I start to come all over again when I feel the first hot spurt of his cum flood into me. He growls, biting and sucking my neck, keeping me folded me in half on his lap as his balls twitch against my clit. I can feel him pumping into me over and over, until my vision starts to blur and black spots swim across it.

I collapse back on his chest, gasping for air as my muscles scream in delicious agony. I can feel him twitching inside me before a wicked smile pulls at my lips.

Kir groans as I slowly slip off his lap, feeling his cock slide out of my swollen pussy. Without a word, I turn and sink to my knees between his, my eyes locking with his.

"*Brooklyn*…" he growls, running his fingers through my hair.

"I thought good girls cleaned it off with their tongues," I say quietly.

I reach for him, wrapping my hand around his sticky cock and stroking it before I lean in. My tongue drags all over the head, teasing down his length and then back up again to tongue the slit at the tip. I flutter my tongue back down his thick shaft, licking and sucking on his balls as I stroke him.

I glide back up the underside, keeping my tongue on his cock and my eyes on his. I hum on him, lips stretched around his enormous girth as I take him deep.

Kir's eyes blaze with black fire as he watches me stroke and suck and slobber all over his sticky cock, tasting both of us together. He starts to roll his hips, and when his hands slide into my hair and tighten, a thrill ripples through me.

I suck him harder and deeper, bobbing my head up and down, *wanting* more of him. All of him.

Always.

His abs clench, and his cock stiffens to steel against my tongue as he groans.

“*Brooklyn*…”

With a grunt, he explodes into my mouth. Hot cum streaks across my tongue, and I moan, sucking on his head as I swallow every sticky sweet drop.

Kir’s dark eyes blaze with need as he grabs me and yanks me up off the floor into his lap. I moan as I settle over him, feeling his hard cock nudge at my pussy.

“You…” I stare at him. “You just came *twi*—”

He slides me down onto him, burying every still-thick inch in me as he wraps my hair in a fist.

“If you *ever* need to quit on me,” he growls. “Just use your safe word.”

This man.…

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36

KIR

"GOOD TO BE BACK?"

Freya sighs. "That feels like a loaded question."

I grin as I pull the car into the underground parking lot beneath the building that houses my Midtown office when I don't feel like working from home.

"If I say *yes*, it's good to be back in Kyoto, I'm a dick because it means I'm happy to have left New York. But if—"

"Freya," I sigh. "Don't overthink it. I've accepted the fact that all three of you are mostly going to be on the other side of the planet now."

She sucks her teeth. "That might make me feel guiltier if I didn't know you have the coolest girl in the world keeping you company."

The three of us ended up having dinner twice more while Freya was in town, and she and Brooklyn have gotten close enough that I'm sure it's going to bite me in the ass at some point.

"Tell her I say hi?"

"Of course." I step out of the elevator into the vast glass and steel office space overlooking Bryant Park. "Did you, ah, find what I was asking you about?"

Freya snorts. "*Duh*. It took me like four minutes."

"A whole four minutes?" I cluck my teeth. "You're slipping."

“Gimme a break. I was on a plane.” She sighs heavily. “Who *is* this guy? He’s fucking gross.”

My jaw tightens. “This guy” would be James Lucareli, Brooklyn’s abusive piece of shit ex-boyfriend.

He's fucking lucky his uncle Giovani is the president of the longshoreman’s union. Even so, that’s not a hard wall, just an obstacle I need to navigate.

And if there *is* no way to navigate it, and I have to smash *through* that wall?

So fucking be it. I’d watch the whole goddamn world burn for her.

“He’s just…a problem,” I growl. “One that I will be dealing with.”

“*Good*,” she mutters. “This guy is a serious piece of shit. Sending you everything I found now.”

After we’ve said our goodbyes, I open my laptop and download the dossier Freya’s emailed me, resting my elbows on my desk as I start to page through it.

Unbelievably, I hate the motherfucker even more after I finish reading.

Laying hands on Brooklyn, terrorizing her and manipulating her is already more than enough for me to want to put this piece of shit through a woodchipper while he’s still alive. But when I see what Freya’s dug up, my blood boils even hotter.

Freya's an expert at searching both known and *unknown* things about people—even if they’re sealed court documents. For instance, part of what she’s found are James’ numerous arrests—and a *pile* of dropped charges—going back to when he was a juvenile: assault, sexual battery, *more* assault, sexual assault, rape, another rape, restraining orders from three different women, another assault charge coupled with a drunk and disorderly, and yet another sexual assault to top it all off.

I glare death at the screen. Somehow, he beat all the charges—probably a mix of his uncle pulling strings with the police union, and some greased palms here and there. I’m also guessing intimidation played a substantial part in it.

In three of his assault cases, the accusers dropped charges. *All* his rape arrests are the same.

I seethe.

James' "lucky streak" has officially *ended*.

Because it's not just the "known" that Freya digs up. She finds all the *unknown* stuff that people *really* don't want to come to light. Every dirty secret. Every vice. Every sin.

James' sins are *plentiful*.

Rape and assault don't appear to be enough to slake the vile hunger in that motherfucker. James has a thing for girls.

And I do mean *girls*.

Based on his web history, his forays into the dark web, and the trove of files on his hard drive, Brooklyn's actually on the *older* side for him.

…By about *ten fucking years*.

Fury and bile churn in my stomach before I close the file and shut the laptop.

I know *exactly* how to deal with James now.

My smug satisfaction as I plan exactly what I'm going to do to him is, sadly, cut short when my phone rings.

That said, a call from Taylor Crown right now could be very good news.

"Ms. Crown," I smile.

Technically, she's "Mrs. Krylov" these days. But given that Crown and Black is one of if not *the* most prestigious law firm in New York, taking the name of her husband—a notorious and ruthless Bratva kingpin—could be bad for business.

"I hope this call means things have transitioned smoothly?"

It took all of *one* conversation with Diego Padilla, Brooklyn's stepfather's lawyer, to decide I didn't trust him further than I could throw him. For what Brooklyn has been shelling out for him, he should not only have had Derrick *out* of prison with all charges dropped by now, but should also be suing the justice department for wrongful prosecution. Yet somehow, despite the considerable money Brooklyn has paid him for various "experts", the case is going nowhere.

Which I why I called in the big guns, reached out to Crown and Black—who've done legal work for me before—and hired Taylor to take over.

Taylor exhales. "There's a small speedbump, Kir."

I scowl. "Padilla? If he's dragging on handing over the case, get a number from him to fuck off, and I'll pay it."

"It's not Padilla," she says slowly. "It's Derrick Wagner."

Shit.

"He's okay, right?" I growl. Not that I give a fuck about the man, but *Brooklyn* does, and if something's happened to him in prison, it's going to destroy her.

"I'm afraid I don't have an answer to that," Taylor says. "But I can tell you what he's *not*, which is *a prison inmate*."

My jaw tightens. "Excuse me?"

"Derrick Wagner is not incarcerated anywhere in New York or any other jurisdiction within the United States."

I frown. "They released him?"

"Correct," she says tightly. "Three years ago, after his last stint for wire fraud."

Holy shit.

"The federal grand larceny charges?"

"*Legally speaking*," Taylor says carefully, "that's all I'm able to share with you given attorney-client privilege. But I'm going to transfer you to, well…

I'll let you get acquainted on your own. I'm sorry I couldn't be more help with this, Kir."

I shake my head. "No no, I appreciate the effort. Thanks, Taylor."

"Of course. Transferring you to Peter now."

The line clicks over.

"Mr. Nikolayev? This is Peter Traif. I…think we've met before."

We have indeed. "Peter—glad to see your skills are still for hire."

Peter is sort of a private investigator, though one that has no issues working, shall we say, *outside* the legal guidelines binding most private investigators. It's why Taylor was so delicate about passing me on to him just now, though I *know* he's done work for Crown and Black in the past.

"I'm hoping you can fill in the blanks Taylor was obliged to omit?"

Peter clears his throat. "Bluntly, Derrick Wagner is a liar. Not only is he not in prison anywhere, the auto shop he was supposedly stealing from doesn't exist."

My eyes widen. "You're joking."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Nikolayev. Derrick Wagner is a con artist and has been for years. He's wanted as Mike Brommer in Texas for bilking a military widow out of her late husband's death benefits. Tennessee knows him as Carl Willoughby, and they'd *love* to talk to him about an investment scam he ran on a retirement home in Mount Juliet."

Motherfucker.

"Tell me you know where he is," I growl, seeing red.

"I don't, not yet," Peter says. "But I've got some promising leads. You want me to find this guy?"

"Definitely," I hiss. "If you can clear the rest of your workload to focus on this, I'll triple your rate."

“Consider it done, Mr. Nikolayev, and thank you. I’ll keep you in the loop. It shouldn’t take me too long.”

When I hang up I surge from the desk and stalk over to the windows, running my fingers through my hair as I pace in front of them.

Mother.

Fucker.

I already didn’t like the piece of shit for losing Brooklyn to the foster system in the first place. I fucking *hated* that she was stripping to keep him out of jail.

But now that I hear that he and Diego have been bilking money out of a girl who's barely keeping her head above water, and that she did it all *for nothing*…?

Pure venom surges through my veins.

The worst part is, I can’t tell Brooklyn. It's obvious she thought Derrick was the *one* man she could actually trust in this world, who wasn’t just trying to rip her off, or play her, or fuck her.

If I tell her all this, it’ll break her. And I can’t do that.

…I *will*, however, rip Derrick’s head from his body when I get my hands on him.

My phone rings again, shattering my lurid fantasies of dismembering Derrick bare-handed.

“Dimitri,” I growl. “To what do I owe—”

“We need to meet, Kir,” he grunts. “*Now*.”

I tense. “What’s this about?”

“In person, Kir,” he sighs. “My restaurant in the West Village. You know it, *da*?”

I do. Truth be told, I’ll miss it when Dimitri pulls out of New York after our deal goes through. It’s not easy to find honest-to-God *vareniki*—Russian

dumplings—in the city.

I agree to meet him and head back to the car to drive downtown.

Dimitri's men nod when I arrive, ushering me through the back door of the closed restaurant.

"Ahhh, Kir." Dimitri stands from the table he's sitting at in the back, offering me his hand before we both sit. He pushes an empty glass in front of me and splashes expensive vodka from the open bottle on the table into it. We clink glasses and drink, then I set my glass down and eye him.

"So, what was so important?"

His face darkens. "It's…not pleasant business, Kir." Dimitri sighs. "This is a big ask… I'm going to need you to restrain yourself in a moment."

My eyes narrow. "*Restrain* myself? Why?"

He looks across the room to his two men standing by the kitchen door. "Bring him," he grunts.

Everything dissolves to a black and red mist when the motherfucker walks in. I'm on my feet in a millisecond, a snarl on my lips as I grab the vodka bottle by the neck, fully prepared to smash it on the edge of the table and use the broken part to carve a hole in Lou's chest.

"Kir, please!" Dimitri barks, moving to me. "This is business."

"The only *business* I have with this piece of shit," I hiss, staring at the manager of The Mirage, "is the business of putting him in the ground, where he belongs."

Lou bristles, glaring at me through a still badly fucked-up face. He's got bandages on the bridge of his nose and over one eye, a brace around his neck, one arm in a sling, and is leaning heavily on a cane to walk.

Good.

I'm planning all the ways I'll break him again when Dimitri places a steadying hand on my shoulder.

“I realize I’m asking a lot,” he hisses. “But *this. Is. Business*, Kir. Put aside your personal thoughts. We all do it when we must.”

I grit my teeth as Lou limps over and drops heavily into a chair next to Dimitri.

“Well,” Dimitri sighs. “I suppose we can skip the part where you pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about when I say we need to speak about the girl currently living at your house.”

“What the *fuck* did you call me here for, Dimitri,” I growl quietly.

“It would appear we have a…” He grimaces. “*Hiccup* in our agreement.”

I grunt. “Our *agreement* doesn’t have anything to do with this maggot. Although, I’m quite close to making sure it does—as in, our deal doesn’t *happen* unless I get to bring this piece of shit to a quiet basement somewhere and play with him for a month or so with a blowtorch and some gardening shears.”

Lou’s mangled face pales as he glances nervously at Dimitri.

“Mr. Moskovic,” he gulps. “We…we had a deal—”

“Shut up,” Dimitri mutters at him before he turns his attention back to me, sighing. “Unfortunately, Kir, Mr. Cassavetti here, along with his club, are under my protection. As you know, he performs a certain service for me, and in exchange, he is permitted to run the day-to-day operations of the club as he sees fit.”

My eyes narrow. “Does that include assaulting the girls who work there?”

Dimitri’s eyes glint darkly, but he spreads his hands and shrugs.

“It’s *his* club, Kir.”

“*Yeah*, motherfucker,” Lou spits. “It’s my fucking—Mr. Moskovic!”

The little bitch scrambles from his seat and *literally hides behind Dimitri* when I jump to my feet.

“Kir, *please*,” Dimitri growls. “Sit. I have a daughter the same age as the girls at his club. Believe me, I don’t work with pieces of shit like him

willingly."

Lou scowls at Dimitri as he takes his seat again.

"Let's talk about the girl you're living with, Kir."

I stiffen. "I don't think that's any of your concern, Dimitri. It's *definitely* not his."

"Well…" Dimitri clears his throat. "Unfortunately, Kir, it is *both* of our concerns. This dancer…a *ballet* dancer, I'm told… You are…*involved* with her?"

"I'm not answering that."

Dimitri smirks. "She's living in your house, Kir."

"It's a large house."

He eyes me and sighs. "Regardless, Mr. Cassavetti would like his dancer back."

I bark a cold, mirthless laugh. "I'm sorry, are you being funny?"

Dimitri sighs even more heavily. "Mr. Cassavetti performs an important service for me, Kir. And again, he and his business are under my protection. What you stole from him is *part* of that—"

"He has an inability to hear the word *no*. What I took out of his grabby little hands is a *person*, Dimitri. Not a cog in someone's business. A *person*."

He exhales, nodding slowly. "I understand. But, Kir, it would go a long way with me if you were to—"

"She's a *human being*, Dimitri," I snarl. "She's not being returned like a piece of merchandise. If you push on this, I'm getting up and walking away right now."

He holds his hands up. "Okay, okay. I hear you." He turns to look at Lou with contempt. "It's off the table."

Lou scowls. "But—"

Lou yelps when Dimitri slaps his face.

“I said the matter is *off the table*.” Dimitri glares at him. “If I hear anything more about you mistreating those girls, I’ll kill you myself. Understood?”

Lou nods miserably, slumping back in his chair.

Dimitri turns back to me. “Now, this ballerina… I’m told she’s quite good.”

I say nothing. Dimitri’s jaw sets a little.

“So good that I hear rumors of her auditioning for the *Ballet Imperiya Korona*.”

Shit.

He clucks his tongue. “Imagine that. A pretty girl, living in your house. You, with your close personal ties to Ivan Yelchin. Which—and stop me if I’m wrong—this girl of yours is almost certainly aware of.”

I stand from the table and calmly button my jacket. “If your intentions were to invite me here for a chat about my personal life, you could have said so earlier, Dimitri.” I level an icy look at Lou. “And you probably could have left this motherfucker in the urinal where you found him.”

Lou glares death at me. But it’s Dimitri who actually looks angrier.

“Do not make the mistake of confusing my friendly disposition during our negotiations as weakness or stupidity, Kir,” he growls. “I know you’ve been coaching Ms. Ellis. I don’t think I have to tell you that you doing so makes me doubt the future of our arrangement.” He levels a cold look at me. “Should it be anyone but my Inessa who is offered that apprenticeship, we have no deal.” He drums his fingers against his glass again. “In fact, Kir, we’ll have *war*.”

I tilt my head. “And here I thought we were moving past the violence and stupidity of our fathers.”

“Deals require a sacrifice on both sides to be equitable, Kir. You’re getting New York. Apparently, you’re getting the girl, too. *Take them*. If you push back on the *Imperiya Korona* question, I can promise you…” His eyes turn icy. “You *will* lose.”

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BROOKLYN

"WAIT, WHAT?"

"A ball," Kir says casually, like it's the most normal thing in the world to go to a black-tie formal event—on a fucking *Wednesday*, none the less.

"It's a fundraiser for…" He frowns, trying to remember. "HIV research." He frowns again. "No, that's later this year. This one might be…dolphins?"

I cock my head to the side, shaking it in amazement. "Are you really invited to so many *balls* that you lose track which is which?"

"It's possible."

"And you want *me* to go with you tonight?"

He frowns. "Why not?"

I feel my cheeks heat. "I dunno…because I'm not a *ball* type of girl?"

"And why is *that*?" he smirks, adjusting his jacket cuffs. It's freaking eight in the morning, and the man is already in a suit, looking like *sin*.

Meanwhile I'm in pj's and a loose ponytail, looking like I just got dragged kicking and screaming out of bed.

"Be…cause?" I shrug.

"Exactly how many balls have you been to, babygirl," he murmurs.

“None!” I blurt. “That's exactly my point!”

“What would have happened if you’d decided never to try ballet simply because you’d never done it before?”

“Shitty example,” I sigh. “I was fucking *terrible* at ballet when I first started.”

“Language,” he growls.

…There’s a chance I deliberately inject swearing into my speech now just to hear him say that.

“But you got better.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, after *years*. But I was terrible the first time, same as I’d suck at going to a ball. Besides,” I shrug, looking down into my coffee again. “I thought we were…you know…”

Kir lifts a brow. “What.”

I sigh. “A secret. I mean…” I trail off, frowning. “Look, *I* don’t care about it—”

“*It*,” he says with a small smile. “Riddles aren’t exactly my strong suit in the morning—”

“The age difference!” I blurt. “It doesn’t bother *me*—”

“I’m *terribly* glad to hear that,” he says dryly.

I giggle, poking his firm stomach. “And it doesn’t bother me what other people would think. Except…”

“…When it comes to work,” he growls, finishing my thought.

I nod glumly. “You know what they’d say. Well, what *some people* might say. I’m *me*, you’re the super-hot, powerful owner of the ballet company I dance for.” I frown. “They’d say I was sleeping with you to boost my career or whatever.”

He lifts a shoulder. “And then there’s what they’d say about *me*: that I’m merely sleeping with the hot, young, *extremely* talented dancer as an ego

boost or as part of a midlife crisis."

"Exactly," I say quietly. "Hence, the secrecy." I shrug. "Like, we don't go out. That sort of thing."

He frowns. "Would you *like* to go out?"

I frown. "That's not what I'm saying."

"So what *are* you saying?"

"I'm not sure," I groan, dropping my forehead to his chest. "But a gala? It seems…kind of public. Don't these things have photographers taking shots of all the fancy rich people for the tabloids?"

"They do."

"Well?"

Kir's lips curl into a smile. "This ball is a *masked* one."

I arch a brow. "Seriously?"

He nods. "So, with that final excuse of yours moot, be ready to go at seven—"

"I don't have a dress." I frown. "I mean, I have *tons* of clothes, thanks to you. But I mean, a *ball* sounds fancy to me—"

"My stylist will dress you," he says briskly, checking his watch. "If you could be home by five-thirty, that'll be enough time for them to do your hair, too."

I stare at him. "I'm sorry, who's doing my hair?"

"The hair person I have coming to the house at five-thirty," he says with amusement before he checks his watch again. "Try not to be late."

I nod. "Yeah, okay…sorry, why do you keep looking at your watch? Are you late for something?"

"Not yet."

I smile curiously. "So, what—"

I gasp when he lifts me up and sits me on the edge of the kitchen counter. “What I was making sure of, babygirl,” he growls, lifting my ass and yanking down my pajama pants, “is that I had enough time for *breakfast* before I left the house.”

I tremble as he shoves my thighs apart. “And what’s for—*oh*…”

A whimper erupts from my lips as he drops to his knees and curls his tongue around my clit.

Oh, THAT breakfast.…

* * *

I STARE at myself in the mirror.

Holy shit.

I look like a fucking *princess*. I look like how I imagine Evie dresses when she’s not at work and no one's around to tease her about her Disney princess vibe.

Okay, not quite. But, if I do say so myself, I look *hot*.

I’m in a black strapless floor-length gown, with a gauzy black floral motif near my right shoulder, and a cascade of delicate, barely noticeable silver sparkles spilling down the side. From the hip down to my knees is fitted like a pencil skirt, then it flares out in a way I absolutely love.

Balenciaga, of course. I’m sure it cost a fucking fortune.

The hair stylist has also worked *sorcery*, turning my hair into a gorgeous creation held by about a thousand bobby pins in an elaborate but fun style. There was also a makeup artist who came and made me look…well… *stunning*.

Time to actually go do this thing.

I take a breath and leave my room, walking along the hall and down the curved stairs to where Kir is waiting in the front foyer. He turns, and I grin

when his eyes widen just a little—such a change from his usual stoic expression. His gaze runs over me, his mouth opening and then closing as he swallows.

“You…”

I frown. “Is it too much? It feels like a little—”

“You're stunning, Brooklyn,” he growls. “Fucking *stunning*.”

I blush deeply, looking down. “*Language*,” I grunt, doing my best Kir impression.

He just shakes his head. “This time, it’s necessary.”

I grin as I walk down the rest of the stairs to join him. “Pretty easy on the eyes yourself,” I tease, eye-fucking the *shit* out of him in his perfect tux.

“This old thing?”

I snort as he smiles and takes my arm, leading me outside.

…Where an *actual stretch limo* is waiting for us.

I’ve never been in one before, but three seconds after settling into the luxurious back of this one, I’m sure I could get used to it.

Very, *very* used to it.

Kir hands me a *flute of champagne*…yes, really…and clears his throat. “I wanted to tell you something.”

I smile curiously. “Oh?”

He nods. “It’s about James.”

Instantly, my face falls, icy cold rippling through me. But then Kir’s right there, pulling me across the seat and planting me firmly on his lap. He holds my jaw, his fierce dark eyes refusing to let me look away.

“I don’t want to talk about—”

“You’ll never see him again.”

I blink. “What?”

“I mean it. I’ve made sure of it.”

My pulse skips. “Did you…is he…?”

“No. Not *yet*,” he growls. “There were some…political issues with killing him. His uncle is the president of the longshoreman’s union, which is how anything and everything gets moved through New York Harbor.”

I nod. “So, if you killed him, his uncle would—”

“If it was just *my* business,” he growls, “I wouldn’t care. I’d skin him myself.”

I bite my lip. It’s *wild* that this man would legit *kill* for me.

…And actually pretty hot, in a kinda fucked-up way.

“But the union also oversees the logistics of some of my allies, and enemies.”

“And he could have it all shut down,” I murmur. “Which would make—”

“A *lot* of people very unhappy,” Kir finishes. “So I did things slightly differently. It would appear James has a penchant for…*younger* women. As in, you’re about ten years older than his usual preference.”

I stare at him. “Are you *serious*?! That's—” I cling to his tuxedo jacket, shaking.

“I had someone I know tell James they were much younger than they actually are, and film him offering them money for sex.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Gross.”

“I agree. So does his uncle.” He smirks. “James has been…*removed* from New York City and sent to work for his other uncle, in a slightly different industry.”

I frown. “Which is…?”

“The shale oil fields of Northern Yukon, just inside the Arctic Circle.” He smiles widely. “I happen to know a few individuals up there who would *love* to break up the boredom of daily life by beating a child molester to death.”

The sensation that slowly melts through me is one of pure *relief*, like a weight has been lifted from my chest, or the shadow that’s been looming over me has suddenly been banished by the sun.

My eyes search Kir’s as I shake my head and press my hands to his chest.

“You did that for me?”

His brow furrows as he takes one of my hands and brings it to his lips. “I will destroy every monster you’ve ever known,” he murmurs. “Without hesitation.”

My heart surges and I melt against him.

“*Thank you*,” I whisper, before his lips find mine.

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KIR

"I DON'T THINK this is the dolphin one."

I chuckle softly as I glance at Brooklyn, then back to the gala we've just entered, then to her again. She's *far* more interesting than…whatever this is for.

Interesting and *gorgeous*. The dress fits her perfectly and makes her look like a goddamn queen. It's actually a shame to cover the top half of her beautiful face—especially her eyes—with the Venetian mask, even if it is part of the dress code for the evening.

I check out some of the displays up on the walls meant to encourage donations, and suddenly remember what tonight is in aid of.

"The Free Them Foundation," Brooklyn reads. "*Not* dolphins."

"Yes. They work to stop child exploitation and trafficking."

Her mouth twists as she glances up at me. "That's awful. I mean, awful that organizations like this have to exist, obviously."

I nod. "There are some real monsters in the world. But these people are doing a lot to stop them." I lower my voice as I lean close to her ear. "It's heavily funded by the Kashenko Bratva. And while they publicize the more *above-board* heroics to combat trafficking, there's another arm of the organization that operates much more…off the radar."

Viktor Komarov and his wife Fiona run the Free Them Foundation, with a lot of help from his son Lukas, and Lukas' wife, Lizbet. And yes, while the organization does do a lot to help local law enforcement, pass legislation, and rescue children from horrific situations, the Kashenko Bratva takes care of a lot of the more…*unseen* aspects of stopping the monsters who would harm children.

Such as hunting said monsters down like dogs and gutting them.

I make a note to have a *very* large check cut to the organization tomorrow.

“I wasn’t sure I’d see you here, old friend.”

I smile as I turn and lock eyes with Yuri Volkov, head of the Volkov Bratva, which sits at the Bratva High Council along with the Viktor. The High Council is an underworld legislative body that works similarly to the Iron Table, at which *I* sit. Yuri and I don’t currently do any business together, but we have, and we’ve always kept a good relationship.

“Yuri,” I smile, taking his hand and shaking it firmly. “It’s been a long time.”

“*Too* long,” he chuckles, turning to the beautiful woman standing next to him, who doesn’t actually need an introduction given that her face is literally on a billboard in Times Square for Louis Vuitton at the moment.

“I’m sure you remember my wife—”

“River Finn!” Brooklyn blurts out before her hand flies to her mouth. “Shit, I’m sorry, that was so rude of me.”

But River, Yuri’s wife, who is indeed a famous fashion model, just shakes her head. “Oh, please, not at all!” she laughs, before turning and giving me a quick hug. “Good to see you again, Kir.”

“And you.” I slide my arm around Brooklyn’s waist, eliciting what I am sure are arched brows behind masks from both Yuri and River.

“This is Brooklyn, my—”

Fuck.

“Girlfriend” sounds odd. But “the woman I’m quickly losing my complete mind over, who I care for more than I’ve ever cared about anyone and would gladly kill for,” feels like a mouthful.

“My…date,” I smile, my fingers spreading over her hip as I tug her close.

“*You*?” Yuri chuckles as he turns to shake Brooklyn’s hand. “You must have drugged him. This man doesn’t date. Or go out and have any fun at all, ever. What’s your secret?”

Brooklyn shrugs. “Nailed it. Drugs.”

Yuri and River erupt in laughter before the latter turns and smiles as she takes Brooklyn’s hand. “Lovely to meet you. And…really, Kir? Your *date*? You couldn’t come up with something better than that?”

I sigh.

Fuck it.

I turn and smile at Brooklyn as my hand tightens on her hip.

“My…girlfriend,” I growl, relishing the way her beautiful eyes twinkle under her mask as they lock with mine.

“*Much* better,” Yuri chuckles, clapping me on the shoulder. He turns to grin at Brooklyn. “Make sure you keep a firm hand with this one. Otherwise he’ll disappear into his work and you’ll be bored to tears.”

“She’s more than adept at holding my attention,” I murmur, still looking into her eyes.

“So, Brooklyn, what do you do?”

“I’m a ballet dancer,” Brooklyn smiles. “At the Zakharova.”

“*Wow*,” River’s brows shoot up. “That’s incredible! I’ve seen your company perform a couple of times.” She beams at Brooklyn. “You must be an insanely good dancer.”

“She’s incredible,” I murmur. “Absolutely incredible.” I cough delicately as I glance back to them. “But we’re trying to keep a low profile, given, well—”

“That you’re her boss?” Yuri smirks. “Trying to avoid scandal?”

“Perhaps,” I reply.

Yuri shrugs. “I say embrace it. I mean, I *kidnapped* this one.” He wraps an arm around his wife, grinning at Brooklyn.

River laughs. “He’s…not joking.”

“Still, your secret is safe with us,” Yuri chuckles. He turns to me. “Come on, I'm sure Viktor would love to know you’re here.”

“He’d love to know my *checkbook* is here,” I grumble.

Yuri bursts out laughing. “You owe him quite the favor, don’t you?”

I snort. “And then some. I haven’t forgotten, just as I’m sure Viktor hasn’t. But I brought something extra special for him tonight—something I’m sure a man of his particular tastes will appreciate.”

Yuri smiles as he glances back at Brooklyn. “Are you part of this special surprise?”

“Oh,” I chuckle, “*very much so*.”

River loops her arm through her husband’s as they walk ahead. I hang back, sliding my arm around Brooklyn’s waist before I lean down to brush my lips over her ear.

“Before I introduce you around,” I growl, “I need you to do something for me.”

She’s got a strange expression on her face as she lifts her eyes to mine. “Oh?”

My cock stirs in my trousers. “Go to the ladies room, take off your panties, and bring them to me.”

Just as I’m preparing to lean down and kiss her mouth or perhaps nuzzle the spot on her neck that I know drives her crazy, her expression changes.

It goes from unreadable to *fearful*, her face paling and drawing tight.

“*What*?” she chokes.

My brow furrows. “I said, go to the ladies room, take your—”

“*Please don’t,*” she whispers in a cold, panicked little voice. “Kir, *please*—”

“Hang on.” I stop and turn toward her, scowling as I put my hands on her arms. “What—”

“*Please don’t make me do that*.”

“I—”

When it clicks into place, I’m not sure which emotion I feel most: horror and sadness, or pure fury.

Maybe both.

“*Come with me,*” I rumble, grabbing her hand and marching us through the ballroom.

Brooklyn stumbles after me, her hand cold in my palm as I lead her through a myriad of hallways. Finally, I open a door and peer inside to find a darkened library. I pull her into it and slam the door shut.

Brooklyn cowers, crumpling under my gaze as she looks down at her hands.

“What did you think I meant back there, babygirl?”

She shakes her head miserably. Fuck me, it breaks my heart.

“Do you honestly think I’m the sort of man who would *give you* to another man, like some sort of fucking I.O.U. repayment?”

When her eyes lock with mine, I know that’s *exactly* what she thought.

You owe him quite the favor, don’t you?

And then some. But I brought something extra special for him tonight—something I’m sure a man of his particular tastes will appreciate.

Christ. And then I told Yuri that Brooklyn was “very much” a part of the surprise, right before I turned to her and told her to go take her fucking panties off before I introduced her to Viktor—

“*Babygirl…*”

She flinches when I storm toward her. Then I’m wrapping her in my arms and pushing her back until she bumps into a bookcase behind her.

“Is *that* what you thought? Truly?”

Her mouth twists as she looks up at me pitifully. “I—I just—”

There’s my fury again. I start to think about her life, and the lowlifes she’s known—the kind who *would* offer her up like some sort of fucking goody bag, or who viewed her as a possession to be “loaned out”.

It makes me want to burn the entire world down, as vengeance for what it’s put her through.

“First, I need to make one thing *perfectly* fucking clear,” I breathe, my hands curling to fists against the bookshelf to either side of her head. “You. Are. *Mine*. No one else’s. Not now…not ever.”

I reach out, cupping her jaw and looking deep in her eyes.

“Second, Viktor is the same way with *his wife*,” I growl. “And third, you have a lot to do with his *special surprise* because his gift from me is season tickets to the Zakharova for him and Fiona. They’re both huge ballet fans.”

Her mouth makes a small “O” shape, her eyes widening as she looks at me in the darkness of the library.

“And last,” I murmur, pinning her to the books at her back, “I told you to go take your panties off *for me*.” My eyes blaze. “I’ve been dreaming about your perfect cunt since I feasted on it this morning.”

She winces, deflating in front of my eyes. “*Fuck*, what is wrong with me? Why did I immediately jump to something so…so…*vile*?”

“Because the men that the world has thrown at you throughout your life were *vile men*,” I hiss. She shivers, gasping as my hand slowly wraps around her throat.

Her lower lip sucks between her teeth. “Y-you’re not a vile man,” she whispers.

“No, I'm not.” I shake my head. “I’m just *your* man.”

When my lips meet hers, fire ignites in both of us. I growl into her mouth, claiming it with my tongue as I pin her to the bookcase. Brooklyn clutches my tuxedo shirt, clinging to me as she moans into my mouth and kisses me fiercely.

“You’re fucking *mine*, babygirl,” I growl into her mouth. “Never anyone else’s.” I pull back just enough to lock my eyes with hers, cupping her jaw as I slowly drag my thumb across her full lips. “But perhaps I haven’t been clear enough on that.”

She whimpers as I lean close, pushing my thumb between her lips.

“Allow me to *rectify that*.”

Brooklyn gasps quietly as my mouth dips to her ear, my teeth nipping at the shell as I breathe into her neck.

“Take your fucking panties off and hand them to me.”

Her breath hitches.

“*Now*, little sinner.”

Her eyes burn with blue fire as they lock with mine. Her face heats, her tongue slipping out to run across her bottom lip, still swollen from my kiss. She keeps her gaze on me as she slowly pulls up her dress, then slips her hands beneath it. She swallows, bending at the knees and peeling her panties down her legs, lifting one heeled foot and then the other to slip them off.

She’s shaking when she places the little black lace thong in my palm.

“Now turn around, open your mouth, and grab the top shelf with both hands.”

A tremor ripples through Brooklyn's exposed shoulders but she nods, turning to face the bookcase and reaching up to the top shelf.

“*Good girl*. Now—open your mouth.”

I bring her panties to my nose, inhaling her sweet scent. I can feel the dewy wetness clinging to the lace, and my cock swells and twitches as I reach my hand around her and stuff the thong into her mouth.

Brooklyn moans quietly, then trembles again when I grab a fistful of her gown at the back and yank it all the way up her thighs and over her tight dancer's ass.

"Count them aloud," I murmur sternly. "I'm going to remind this ass exactly *whose it is*."

I draw back, and when I crack my palm across her ass, it's like I'm punishing the world for all the shit it's handed her.

CRACK.

Brooklyn shrieks, rising up on her toes as red blooms over her soft skin.

"*One*," she mumbles through the panties in her month.

I wind up a second time, slamming my palm against the other cheek and making her writhe and flinch and rise up on her toes again.

"*Two*!"

I keep spanking her, wanting to brutalize the fucking world and remind her exactly how *mine* she is, all at once. By the time I hit eight, she's squirming and squeezing her thighs together. By ten, she's a moaning, shuddering mess as she sags against the bookshelves, drooling into her fucking panties.

I didn't tell her how many there would be, but by eleven I can't hold back.

Brooklyn whimpers eagerly when I yank my belt open and rip down my zipper. I pull out my swollen cock, fisting it as I grab a handful of her hair, using my weight to pin her in place. I shove my thigh between hers, prying her legs wide apart before I ease my cock against her slick little pussy.

I ram inside with one insane thrust, making Brooklyn *scream* into the panty gag as she rises up onto the balls of her feet again. She moans desperately as I grind as deeply as I can.

My hand slides over her hip to plunge between her legs, cupping her pussy from the front and rolling her clit with my thumb. I slide out, teasing her with my swollen head and relishing the way she moans and shakes when I rub her swollen clit. Then I slide right back in, groaning at the way her back arches and her breath comes in short, staccato little whimpers.

I twist her long blonde hair around my other hand, fisting it and tugging sharply, making her squeal when I yank her head back. My teeth rake across her neck as I roll her clit and fuck my cock into her, *hard*.

“Not a single other man will ever lay his fucking hands on you,” I snarl, rolling my hips and burying my thick cock in her pussy. Her slick, velvety walls grip my dick tightly, milking me as I fuck into her, claiming her against the bookcase. She moans, her back arching as she pushes her ass back to meet my thrusts.

“*Whose* fucking pussy is this?” I hiss, ramming into her so hard that she rocks up onto the balls of her feet again, the muscles in her arms tense and corded as she clutches the shelf above her head.

She moans something unintelligible into her panties before I tug them from her mouth. I reach up and wrap them around her wrists, binding them together before I loop some of the lace over a hook driven into the top shelf, keeping her there, at my mercy.

“*Answer me*,” I groan, driving into her and gritting my teeth as I feel her sweet pussy leaking all over my swollen cock. “*Whose fucking pussy is this?*”

“*Yours!!*” she sobs, writhing in pleasure as I fuck her from behind and play with her swollen clit. “*It’s your pussy, sir*!”

“And does *my* fucking pussy want to come all over this fat fucking cock?”

A shudder wrenches through her, arching her back as her arms strain against the lace binding her to the shelves and she moans even louder.

“*Yes, sir*!” she shrieks, her body shaking and her pussy clamping down tight around my cock.

“Then be a good girl,” I snarl as I pound into her, rearing back and spanking her ass. “And come all over that big fat dick, babygirl. Be *my* good girl and—”

“*Oh FUCK!!*”

She screams, her whole body spasming as pure pleasure rips from her throat. She moans when I grab her by the jaw, twist her head around, and lean in to kiss her viciously, *punishingly*, as I ram my cock all the way inside her to the hilt.

“*I’m coming*!!” she wails into my mouth as I follow her over the edge. Her hot pussy ripples and clenches my cock, shattering the last of my ability to hold back.

With a groan, I roll her clit again and then bury every thick inch of my cock into her, grinding as deep as I can as I feel myself get ready to release.

“*Come with me, babygirl*. Come all over my fat fucking cock like a good girl.”

Her cum floods my cock, dripping down my balls just as they tighten and spasm. I crush my mouth to hers, kissing her possessively as my cum spills into her tight little cunt.

Just to be sure she knows exactly how *mine* and only mine she is, I end up fucking her once more across a table in that same room, before I drop to my knees and feast on her freshly-fucked, swollen pussy.

Her panties are too ruined for her to wear after being stretched and ripped against that hook I bound her to. But *that* is just a fun little reminder that keeps a smile on my face and my dick hard as I spend the rest of the evening watching her move around the gala, talking to people and smiling away.

…All without panties, and my cum dripping down her thighs.

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KIR

THE PARKING GARAGE of the building that houses my office is dark when I get out of the elevator. I check my phone and grin when I see a text from Brooklyn.

BROOKLYN

I was going to make a steak dinner, but then remembered I suck at cooking.

BROOKLYN

So I hope this is a suitable alternative.

BROOKLYN

Sir.

The next text that comes through has my cock swelling to steel in my trousers. It's a selfie of her, sitting on the dining room table at the house, her legs spread, her skirt hiked up, and her fingers pulling the lacy gusset of her panties aside.

Yeah, *fuck* the steak.

"I'm a lot fuckin' smarter than you think I am."

I'm only slightly startled when I hear Lou's voice from the shadows. Mostly because he is *not*, in fact, smart at all. I watched him jimmy open the emergency exit door to the garage from my laptop upstairs. I watched with grim amusement as he drank from a flask and then prowled around until he found my car.

The only surprise is that he’s dumb enough to confront me here, alone.

This will not end how you think it will, motherfucker.

“In five seconds,” I growl, turning to face him, my eyes boring into him, “I’m going to break your face, *again*, then cut your balls off with my car keys.”

Lou glares at me.

“Five.”

“I know you’re teaching that little bitch,” he snarls.

“Three.”

Lou’s face darkens. “The fuck happened to four!?”

“You lost it when you called her a little bitch. *Two*.”

I jangle my keys loudly.

“Yeah? Well, I also know something *else*,” Lou spits. “I know that fancy fuckin’ ballet company in Moscow doesn’t just care about talent.”

I pause. What the fuck is the little creep getting at.

He seems emboldened by the fact that I haven’t said “one” yet. “They also care about *character*,” he sneers. “As in, they only take dancers who are *classy people*.”

Lou chuckles.

“Wonder what they’d think about a ballerina stripping on a fuckin’ pole. I wonder if they'd want some *slut* who used to grind all over men’s dicks for cash.”

Lethal fury ignites inside me. Mental images I have no interest in flood my brain anyway—images that make me want to break something.

I don’t judge her *at all* for what she did to survive. I know what being trapped between annihilation and the abhorrent feels like, and I’ve done *much worse* to avoid the former.

That still doesn’t mean I enjoy the thought of what she used to do.

I take a menacing step toward the greasy little shit grinning at me. Lou pales, backing away from me and wagging a piggy little finger at me.

“Nuh-uh,” he says. “You kill me, all of this gets sent to that ballet. Just try and—*eee!*”

Lou flails as I grab him by the throat and level a withering look at him.

“I don’t have to *kill* you,” I growl. “I could just throw you in front of a fucking bus and turn you into a vegetable for the rest of your life, how's that sound.”

He swallows against my hand, his beady eyes darting about frantically.

“I—I have security measures in place!” he blurts. “F-for my safety!”

“Your best *security measure*,” I snarl, “would be *not* cornering me in a dark garage.”

“If anything happens to me!” he shrieks, “someone will email proof of your obvious intentions of double-crossing him to Mr. Moskovic. Proof that you’re trying to push that little sl” —he chokes as my hand clamps down around his throat— “*Brooklyn* over Inessa to that ballet. They’ll also email them proof of her working at my club.”

He smiles smugly.

“You get what I’m sayin’ now, huh? Fancy ballets don’t make a habit of hiring girls off a pole, do they?”

“My arrangement with Dimitri is none of your concern,” I growl. “And I don’t expect you have any idea what a company like the *Imperiya Korona* does or does not look for in a dancer.” I smile icily. “Nice try, fucker. Next time, let the big boys do the real mafia shit. You can stay in your grubby office at the strip club, rubbing your limp dick as you think about women who will never, *ever* touch you.”

Rage rolls across Lou’s face as he sneers at me.

“Won’t touch me, huh?” he sneers. “Think I don’t know what the ballet wants?” He yanks his phone out. “How about this shit then, motherfucker!”

He taps on something and shoves the phone in my face. At first I scowl, not sure what I’m looking at.

Then my veins turn to ice and my stomach drops through the floor.

In the video, Lou is at his desk in his office, beckoning off camera.

Brooklyn walks into frame, looking scared and flat-out *gaunt*, like she hasn’t eaten in a week. Her whole body language is deflated, her shoulders drooping, bags under her eyes.

“Please, Lou,” she croaks quietly in a small voice that breaks my heart. “I… I really need this. I’m…” She swallows, hugging herself. “I’m in a tough spot—”

“Brooky, Brooky, Brooky,” Lou sighs on camera. “I *get* it. But, look, you’re new here, and I just don’t know if this is the right job for—”

“*Please*,” she chokes, near tears. My jaw clenches so hard I might crack a tooth as I glare at the screen.

Lou takes a slow breath. “Tell you what, kid,” he leers. “Maybe you and I can…you know…*make a deal*.”

When he starts to unbuckle his belt, all I see is red. When he pulls his zipper down and reaches inside, all I know is pure, venomous fury.

“All my favorite girls do this for me sometimes, Brooky.”

She starts to cry as he takes her hand with his free one and tugs her closer.

“You help me, I help you with the good shifts.”

He pulls out his dick and starts to push her to her knees.

…Yeah, I’ve seen enough.

In half a second, I’ve gabbed Lou’s phone out of his hands and hurled it at the garage wall. It smashes and bounces off the cement, rattling across the

ground toward me, where I stomp on it with my heel until the fucking thing shatters.

When I whirl on him, ready to rip his fucking limbs from his body and choke him with his own severed dick, Lou starts to cackle.

“I have *tons* of copies,” he grins. “Of your *girlfriend* on her knees, with my—”

He chokes, his eyes bulging as my hand wraps like iron around his throat and squeezes.

“You prey on the desperate,” I snarl through gritted teeth. “You—”

“*Kill me and that video gets sent to Moscow*!” he wheezes, his face purple as he claws helplessly at my wrists. “*If…I…die,*” he sputters, “I’ll make sure her life is *ruined*. That ballet company will get it. The fuckin’ tabloids will get it. I’ll post it on the goddamn internet!”

My hand drops from his throat as he wheezes for air.

I'd like to say I don’t know how I do it—but actually, I *do*. Because as much as I want to kill this motherfucking piece of shit predator, trading that pleasure for Brooklyn’s life getting dragged through the mud is not an option.

“Cut the bullshit,” I hiss coldly. “What do you want.”

Lou coughs violently, rubbing his throat. “When your deal with Dimitri goes through and he leaves the city…” He scowls. “I make a *lot* of money from him…”

I glare at him. “What. Do. You. *Want*.”

Lou swallows. “Five million dollars. Five mill, and that little home video goes away. The copies, too.”

He eyes me warily as he backs away, still rubbing his throat.

“By next week, Mr. Nikolayev.”

I want to break him in half, slowly and painfully. But I keep my emotions relatively in check as I eye him cooly. *Relatively*.

“Why wait.”

I reach into my jacket pocket and pull out a checkbook and pen.

“Where are the other copies, Lou.”

He stares at me, dumbstruck.

“*Where. The fuck.* Are the other *copies*.”

I turn and lean against the roof of my car as I make out a check for the full five million. Then I tear it out of the checkbook, turn back, and hold it out to him.

“What the fuck is this?” Lou growls suspiciously.

“This is how the *big boys* do it,” I growl. “I’m not going to play any fucking leverage game with you here, nor am I going to sit around with my thumb up my ass waiting for you to make bigger threats. Just take the fucking money and tell me where all the copies are.”

Lou he reaches out and anxiously plucks the check from my fingers. He stares at it, his mouth slowly pulling into a dazed grin.

He’s an idiot. No bank in their right mind is going to let a guy like Lou waltz in and cash a check for *five fucking million dollars.* Especially when every bank in this city knows *exactly* who the fuck I am.

“The *copies*, motherfucker.”

He blinks and quickly looks up at me. “Oh… Yeah, hang on,” he mumbles, like he’s dizzy just from holding what he thinks is his ticket to riches. He fishes around in his jacket pocket and yanks out another cellphone.

I stare at him. “That’s *it*?”

He nods.

“No cloud storage?”

Lou shakes his head. “No, I swear. It’s just right there on that phone.”

In case I needed further proof of how fucking stupid this man is…

He's lucky that I can’t touch him yet. Not until Dimitri is done with him and pulls out of New York. When that day comes, I *will* be finding this monster and cutting him into little chunks.

I take the phone from him and turn it on, click on the factory reset screen, then tap it. The phone goes black as I destroy another monster from her past.

“Pleasure doing—”

“Some advice, Mr. Cassavetti,” I growl as I turn away to open my car door. “Run *very* far away and hide. Try, at least. Once Dimitri is done with you, I *will* be hunting you down. Like a dog.”

I glance back at him, relishing the way his face goes milk-white.

“Well…” he mumbles. “D-Dimitri says I could maybe work for him in Russia.”

Yeah, that’s a speed bump, not a golden parachute.

“That’s my advice, motherfucker,” I say tersely. “Run far and hide well. When I find you, I’m going to redefine words like *misery* and *inhumane* for you. Is that understood?”

He nods quickly.

“Good. Now fuck off. The next time I see you, I *will* kill you.”

* * *

BROOKLYN LOOKS up from her phone when I come storming through the back door and into the kitchen.

“H-hi?” she says, her brow furrowing. “Is everything okay—?”

She gasps as I surge into her, grab her tight, and kiss her punishingly and brutally. I kiss her like I’m conquering her mouth and destroying her demons.

“*I need to fuck you*,” I rasp darkly.

Her eyes hood and her lip slips between her teeth. “*Okay*,” she breathes.

My eyes lock with hers as a devil enters my body. “I’m not going to be gentle,” I hiss. “I’m not going to let up. And you *need* to remember your safe word.” My eyes narrow. “Do you?”

Brooklyn nods and lets out a moan as she sinks against me, rising up on her tiptoes and letting her lips brush my ear.

“*Hurt me, sir*…”

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BROOKLYN

"YOUR ATTENTION, ladies and gentlemen. I have an announcement."

I wince as Val pushes harder on my foot, stretching my hamstring as I lie on the ground. Then he lets go and helps me up as we all turn to Madame Kuzmina as she floats to the front of the studio.

"*If this is the part where she pulls off her face to reveal the demon underneath,*" Val mutters to me under his breath. "*I'm fuckin'* here *for it*."

"Something to share, Mr. Bancroft?" Madame Kuzmina barks.

"Only in private, Madame," he grins wolfishly at her, lacing his hands behind his head and flexing his tatted arms. "Unless you're into the public thing?"

I turn to stare at him, Milena giving him the same "are you completely fucking insane" look on the other side of him.

Madame Kuzmina doesn't blink. She just smiles icily, her ringed fingers flexing.

"You're looking a bit *bloated* today, Mr. Bancroft."

Milena snorts as Val's jaw drops. "*Excuse me*?"

"Pudgy. Out of shape. *Fat*."

Val blinks, both amused and shocked. "Is anyone else hearing this?"

“If my female dancers are to remain at a certain weight,” Madame Kuzmina sighs, “I see no reason for that not to extend to the men.” She smiles at him. “Why don’t you do a quick loop of Central Park. Running, of course.”

Val’s brows rise. “That’s like…eight miles.”

“So it is.” Madame Kuzmin’s smile fades away. “You’ll need to hurry if you want to get back before we’re finished today.”

The room is silent as we look at Val. His face darkens for a moment. But then, there’s that easy, smug grin of his again as he shrugs. “Guess so.”

He’s still smiling as he turns and mutters “*fucking sadist*” to me out of the corner of his mouth before walking out the door.

Madame Kuzmina clears her throat. “Unless there are any *other* jokes anyone is dying to get off their chest…”

Right.

“I wanted to bring it to your attention that we have a guest with us today.”

She gestures to the back of the room, and when I turn, I’m surprised to notice a new girl standing there who I’ve never seen before.

“Inessa Moskovic. She’s visiting New York right now, and I was happy to invite her to work with us today. Inessa has previously danced for the Royal Ballet in London, as well as Teatro dell’Aurora in Florence.”

Fuck.

Those are two *seriously* impressive companies, and she looks younger than me.

Madame doesn’t waste any more time. We immediately split up into groups and get back to work. I occasionally glance over to the new girl, and it’s everything I can do not to stare.

“She’s *really* fucking good,” Naomi sighs, stretching at the barre next to me.

“I thought you’d vanquished that imposter syndrome?” I tease her.

She rolls her eyes. “I *have*. Well…” A blush tinges her cheeks. “Nico helped.”

I grin before turning to watch Inessa again.

“Holy shit,” Naomi whistles. “That resume? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I mean, *look at her*,” Lyra adds. “Her line is *flawless*. And I’m pretty sure she *just* learned that choreography like ten minutes ago.”

Madame barks at us to stop staring and get back to work. An hour later, when we've regrouped, I find myself dancing right next to Inessa.

“Hey…sorry to bother you…”

I pause mid-turn, stopping to glance at her with a smile. “Oh, no bother at all.” I exhale, rolling my shoulders. “I could use the breather,” I grin.

She smiles back. “Inessa, hi.”

“Hey,” I shake her hand. “Brooklyn.”

She frowns. “Do you think you could show me how you’re moving into the *penché* out of the *grand jeté en tournant*? I've never had choreography where I had to do that, and I can’t for the life of me figure it out.”

I stare at her. “Really?”

Her face falls. “Yeah… I don’t know why I’m having so much trouble—”

“Oh! No!” I laugh. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. I just meant, you’re *incredible*. We’ve all been staring at you all day. I’m shocked you need *my* help.”

She smiles. “Are you serious?” She shakes her head. “Guess we all have imposter syndrome.” I frown in confusion, and she laughs lightly. “Brooklyn, you’re *extremely* talented. I’ve been lowkey watching you dance all day. You’re *so* fucking good.”

Heat rushes into my face. “I…am bad at taking compliments.”

She laughs. “Join the club.”

“Here,” I smile. “I'll show you how I’m sticking the *penché*. Use your core and your inner thigh.”

I go through the movement a few times, showing her how I land it. Admittedly, it's a pretty tricky and weird transition.

“Oh my God, *thank you*,” she sighs. “That was going to drive me nuts.”

I grin. “No problem. How long are you in New York?”

“A couple of weeks. My dad is finishing up some business here and then moving back to Russia.” She smiles sadly. “I love New York City, but I’m not sure when I’ll be coming back.”

“Got any plans while you’re here?” I smile. “A friend of mine is having a birthday party in just over a week and a bunch of us from here are going. You should totally join us!”

She beams. “Really? It wouldn’t be weird?”

“Please.” I shake my head. “It’s at this super fun club, and it’ll be a great time. You should definitely come!”

Rehearsal is winding down as a bedraggled-looking Val jogs through the door to the studio and collapses to his knees, shirtless and dripping in sweat.

“Fuck, it’s a million fucking degrees outside,” he groans.

Inessa and I swap numbers before she takes off. I’m about to go grab Val some more water when Dove steps in front of me, looking extremely confused.

“What’s up?”

Dove’s brow shoots up. “You…don’t know who she is?”

I frown. “Like, who her *dad* is?”

Dove shakes her head. “No, I mean, *she’s* your competition for Moscow.”

My eyes widen. “*What*?” I turn to stare at Inessa just as she walks out of the studio.

“Yep,” Dove says quietly. “And from what I hear, she’s guaranteed to get that apprenticeship with *Ballet Imperiya Korona*.” She makes an unimpressed face. “*Kir* is getting her in.”

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41

KIR

THE MOMENT I step into the house, I can feel the tension dissipating.

It's been like that ever since Brooklyn moved in. Like there's a calmness to the place that wasn't here before. A peace. Honestly, I could get very used to it.

I've gotten very used to *her* being here, too. There's never been any end date on this, I just told her when she first got here that "she lived here now".

Now, I know how much I meant that.

It's not even that "I don't mind if she stays." It's far more than that. It's that *I don't want her to leave*.

Ever.

I don't want a day to come where she's moved on from this house, or from me. She's not just *in* my life anymore, she's a *part of* it, in a way I never anticipated, and in a way I know I won't ever tire of.

I roll my shoulders and walk across the kitchen to get a drink, when I pause. My brow furrows as I turn slightly, hearing classical music playing faintly from somewhere in the house.

I follow the sound—the *Grand Pas Classique*, I realize as I get closer—and stop in the doorway to the ballroom, my eyes riveted on her.

Christ, she's beautiful when she dances.

And yet, there’s something off. The longer I watch her, the more I see an almost manic expression on her face—the pursed lips, and feverish concentration. Loose wisps of her hair are stuck to the sides of her face as sweat soaks the back of her leotard.

There's a look of pure exhaustion warring with punishing drive in every movement and facial tick.

When the music finishes, Brooklyn’s back is to me as she bends forward, panting for air, her hands on her knees and her legs shaking.

The music starts up again immediately, on a loop. She gets back into position, preparing to start again.

Brooklyn flinches and whirls on me when I shut off the music.

“Turn that back on,” she says, not looking me in the eye. “I wasn’t finished.”

I frown. “You need a break.”

“I'm fine.”

“Brooklyn, you’re—”

“Practicing, yes,” she snaps coldly. “Turn it back on, please.”

I'm not turning the music back on when she can barely stand.

“What is this?” I ask cautiously.

“I told you: I'm practicing. If I’m going to have a snowball's chance in hell of getting into *Imperiya Korona*, I need to be better.”

My jaw locks. “Brooklyn—”

“Please. Just turn the music on.”

“Can you please look at me for one—”

“Turn the music on.”

I shake my head. “Why are you killing yourself like this? Babygirl, you’re phenomenal—”

“*Not as phenomenal as Inessa Moskovic*.”

The words lash out like a slap. She’s still got her back to me, but slowly she turns around, her expression tight and grim.

“You’re using your connection with Ivan to get her in, right?”

Fuck.

My eyes lock on hers as I shake my head. “It’s not that simple,” I say quietly.

She shrugs. “Oh, but it is. There’s one opening, and you’ve already decided who's going to get it.”

“That is *not* how it wo—”

“It’s fine,” she snaps coldly. “I *was* hurt.” Her mouth twists. “But now I’m just motivated. She’s *really* good.” She gives me a pointed look. “Inessa, that is. She came to dance with us today.”

My jaw sets.

“Still, I have that callback with Ivan next month. I know there’s only one apprenticeship—well, *none*, I guess, since it's taken. But if I work my ass off between now and then, maybe I can convince him to—”

“*Brooklyn*.”

I start to walk toward her, but she tightens her mouth and spins away from me, getting into her starting position.

“I *really* need to get back to work,” she says flatly. “So if you could just turn the music back on—*hey!!!*”

She hisses, kicking and yelling as I grab her up in my arms and march over to the big sofas by the fireplace. I sit heavily in one, forcing a squirming, fighting, twisting Brooklyn onto my lap.

“Let me the fuck go!” she spits, trying to free her arms. “I have to—”

“*No*,” I hiss, grabbing her wrists, yanking them to the small of her back and pinning them there as she struggles on my lap.

“Let me the fuck *GO*—!”

“STOP IT!” I roar, holding her wrists tight and shaking her. My eyes blaze into hers. “There’s another Bratva organization—the Moskovic Bratva. My own organization and theirs have been at odds since my father was alive and the Nikolayev Bratva was just a small gang of street thugs. It’s been *decades* of bullshit, fighting, and declarations of war, and it *cannot continue*.”

I exhale heavily. “Inessa’s father, Dimitri, runs the family now. And part of our agreement toward a lasting peace treaty is that *I* stay out of Russia, *he* stays out of New York, and I use my influence with Ivan Yelchin to get Inessa into the *Imperiya Korona*.”

Brooklyn’s still not looking me in the eye, but at least she’s stopped squirming.

“*That said*,” I growl. “Ivan is his own man, and the *Imperiya Korona* is his company. I can make recommendations, and they may go a long way with him. But that’s all they are: *recommendations*. Ultimately, Ivan will pick the best dancer he sees to fill the spot.”

“Don’t do that,” she says tightly.

“Do what?”

“Give me a false sense of hope. I don’t want it, and I don’t need it.”

“You’re *right*,” I hiss tightly. “You *don’t* need hope or prayers or wishes or any of that bullshit. Because you have something better: *sheer fucking talent!*”

Brooklyn glares at me and tries to yank her arms back again. But I grip her wrists tighter, looking her right in the eye.

“I know I should have told you about my arrangement with Dimitri,” I growl quietly. “I’m fucking sorry. But the way you lit up with that dream in your eyes…”

She looks away, blinking back tears. “Yeah, a dream you’ve already promised to Inessa,” she says quietly. All the fight leaves her as she sits on

my lap, deflated. “Look, I understand that my dreams of dancing in a particular company aren't as important as mafia politics—”

“That’s not true—”

“Of course it is, Kir,” she says quietly, turning to look me dead in the eye. “The Zakharova's great, and I know I should be happy where I am, but…” She looks down, exhaling slowly. “The *Imperiya Korona.*.. It just seemed like the final goal, you know? The top of the hill. The end game.”

My jaw grinds as I keep her hands pinned with one of mine, reaching for her cheek with the other.

“Your dreams are every fucking bit as important as boring mafia political bullshit, little sinner. More, actually.”

She smiles wryly. “But if you don’t get Inessa that spot…what, you go to war?”

“Again, technically speaking,” I growl quietly as I exhale, “my deal with Dimitri says I have to *recommend* Inessa.” I lock eyes with her. “But it’s Ivan who will have the final say, and there’s nothing to say I can’t prepare you for that audition.”

“How exactly would Dimitri Moskovic view that?”

I shrug. “However he likes.”

“*Kir*,” she frowns. “Don’t joke around. You’re seriously talking about a full-blown Bratva *war*?”

I shake my head as I push a stray lock of blonde back from her face. “If your dream is to get to Moscow,” I growl quietly, “I will move Heaven and burn down Hell to get you there.”

Even if it means losing her.

Because that’s the second shoe waiting to drop that I can’t bear to tell her: if she goes to Moscow, *I can’t go with her*, per my deal with Dimitri. It’s not just that I stay out of Russia from a business perspective. It’s that I literally *cannot go there*, just as he won’t be able to come back here, to the U.S.

There may be a way for me to uphold my deal with Dimitri by *recommending* Inessa to Ivan, but still have Brooklyn get the spot.

But there's one reality I can't escape: if I help her achieve her dream, I lose her.

Brooklyn rests her forehead on mine, biting her lip.

"Sorry," she says quietly.

"You have nothing to apologize for."

"Hmm…" She shrugs. "I was kind of a bitch when you walked in."

"You were in the zone. I interrupted."

"Still, I was a brat."

"You really—"

Brooklyn slaps me. Not hard, just enough to startle me and ignite a snarl inside me. She grins impishly, raking her teeth over her bottom lip.

"The fuck was that?" I growl.

She lifts a shoulder, still biting her lip. "Me being a brat."

"That's not being a brat, that's—"

She slaps me again.

"How about now?" she whispers, fire sparking in her eyes. "*Sir*? Or—"

She goes to do it *again*. This time, I grab her wrists and yank them tight behind her back.

"Okay…" I growl, my muscles coiling. Brooklyn gasps as I swiftly twist her around and yank her down across my lap. "*Now* you're being a fucking brat. And you're not. Wearing. Tights."

Her breath hitches as I grab the back of her leotard in my fist and pull it tight between the smooth globes of her ass. She whimpers when I give it a tug, making it rub against her pussy. Then my hand swings up before crashing back down with a sharp *smack* across her bare ass.

Brooklyn exhales, a moan mixed with a soft groan. Her body goes slack across my lap, and my cock throbs as I wind up and do it again.

Fuck, I love how much she loves this. How her body responds so eagerly to control and dominance. How she craves the catharsis of punishment and pain.

I spank her again as she whimpers in pleasure. I can feel the slick heat of her against my thighs as I spank her again and again, before I suddenly yank the crotch of her leotard to the side and push my fingers between her legs.

"*Oh fuck…*" she moans, arching her back as I sink two fingers into her greedy little cunt. I pump them in and out with deep, purposeful strokes, feeling how fucking wet she is as she makes a complete mess of my hand.

"Is this what you wanted, little sinner?" I growl. "To *provoke* me into punishing this ass until your pussy creams all over my fingers?"

Brooklyn's only response is to choke out a moan as my fingers pound into her, filling the ballroom with the deliciously wet, slippery sounds of her messy pussy soaking my fingers. My thumb slides up the crease of her ass, and Brooklyn whimpers when I press the pad of it to her puckered back hole.

"*Sir*…" she chokes.

My fingers stroke into her clenching pussy, fingering her faster and faster. My thumb drags in slow, lazy circles around her asshole, making her quiver and shake on my lap.

I grab the straps of her leotard and tug them off her shoulders. Just as she's about to slide the straps from her wrists I twist the fabric, binding her arms behind her back with her own leotard.

Brooklyn moans when I quickly unbuckle my belt and yank down my zipper. I reach inside and pull out my swollen cock, stroking it right in front of her face as I finger her pussy and tease her asshole.

"Open wide like a good girl," I growl, relishing the way her face crumples with lust. "I'm going to *fuck* your pretty mouth."

She whimpers, opening her mouth wide, her eyes hooding as they swivel up to mine. I ease my thick head between her lips and tangle my fingers in the back of her hair.

"*Please fuck my mouth, sir*," she mumbles, her jaw open wide and her lips around my dick.

Well, since she asked…

I groan as I thrust my hips, pushing the swollen head of my cock into the back of her throat. She moans eagerly around me, slurping and sucking and licking like crazy as she gags and whimpers. I pump my fingers faster, fucking her messy pussy with them as she starts to whimper louder around my cock.

"*Just* like that," I grunt, lifting my ass to push my cock into the back of her throat. "You're doing so well, little sinner, being such a fucking good girl."

Without warning, Brooklyn's body jerks, choking on my cock and drooling all over it as she cries out. Her pussy spasms and clenches around my fingers, squeezing them tight as she floods my hand with her cum.

I quickly flip her over onto her back, spit and precum smeared across her gorgeous mouth, her hands still bound at the small of her back. I yank all my clothes off and push between her thighs, wrapping them around my hips as I pull her leotard aside and ease my cock against her glistening pink pussy.

"Show me how good girls take a big, fat dick, baby."

I slide into her, groaning at the sight of her face going slack, her eyes rolling back and her dripping cunt swallowing my cock.

"*Fuuuck*, babygirl," I groan, grinding as deep into her as I can. "That's such a sweet, *tight* pussy."

Brooklyn whines in pleasure as I slide out and ram right back in, luxuriating in the silky feel of her tight cunt rippling around my cock and squeezing it.

I grab her hip with one hand and wrap the other around her throat. Our eyes meet just before I crush my mouth to hers, swallowing her moans and

starting to fuck her *hard*.

My hips crash into her thighs, her legs wrapped tight around my waist as I fuck into her. I devour her mouth, her lips, her tongue as I feel her cunt clench around me. Her nipples tighten to points and drag across my chest as her back arches, her bound hands clawing at the sofa as she moans in ecstasy.

"*Whose fucking pussy is this*," I growl into her mouth, biting her lips and making her squeal as I slam into her.

"*Yours, sir! It's yours!*" Her face caves. "Oh *fuck*!" she pants. "Kir, I'm—I'm going to—"

"*Uh-uh*," I rasp against her lips, tightening my hand around her throat as I fuck into her faster, her pussy strangling my cock as she comes apart at the seams. "You don't get to come yet," I hiss. "Not until *I fucking say so*."

She moans deeply, her thighs locked around my hips. I keep fucking her, pounding harder, until she's emitting one long, drawn-out guttural moan and her pussy is clenching like a vice around my cock.

"*PLEASE, sir!*" she whines. "*Please let me come!*"

I groan, my balls tightening as our eyes lock.

"That's it, babygirl. Keep those pretty eyes on me. Only me. *Look at me* while I claim this pretty fucking pussy."

"I—*oh fuck! Oh fuuuuck!*"

I drag my mouth from her lips, nipping and sucking them before sliding down her jawline to her neck. I bite down, making her scream in pleasure as her pussy starts to seize up around me.

"*Now, babygirl*," I husk right into her ear. "*Now* you can fucking come for me like my good girl."

It's like sticking her with a live wire. Brooklyn's body arches off the couch in a mad, violent explosion. A choked moan of utter release tears from her throat as her hips meet mine.

With a groan, I sink *deep* into her, keeping myself there as my cock pumps spurt after spurt of hot cum into her.

For the rest of the night, we just lie there on the couch in the ballroom, me holding her in my arms, her face on my chest. At one point it starts to rain, and after looking at it through the window for a while, I pull her down onto my lap and watch as she slowly rides me, rolling her hips up and down, dragging it out as long as possible with the rain against the windows until we explode together.

Whatever happens next, or ever, that’s how we’ll do it.

Together.

Because together, we’re unstoppable.

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42

KIR

FOR THE RECORD, I fucking *hate* Florida.

It's the humidity. Years in the frozen, bitter north of Siberia, eating fucking rats and bugs? Fine. Wouldn't recommend, would *not* do again, but it was fine.

But *Florida*? If I had to spend more than twelve hours here, I'd lose my mind.

Luckily, I don't plan on being here even a fraction of that.

When I hear the commotion outside on the second-floor walkway of the motel, I take a slow breath and just *wait*. The sound of two women's shrill, coked-up laughter slams against the door at the same time as a man-sized body.

"*One sec, one sec*," the man laughs heartily, jangling his keys. "I got another eight-ball inside. You two ladies can do rails off my dick."

The girls cheer and hoot. My brow cocks.

Showtime.

My priority is and always will be to protect Brooklyn—both her physical *and* emotional safety.

Right now, she's still under the impression that Derrick is one of the few if only men she can trust in the world. If she learns the truth about what's

been going on for the last year and change, it'll destroy her.

And I *will not* allow that to happen.

It's going to pain me to tell her a lie. Well, a half-truth, if I'm being generous. But again, my priority is to keep her heart safe. And when presented with two terrible options, this is the lesser of two evils.

The lock clicks, and the door slams open as three laughing, groping, sloppy bodies tumble into the motel room.

"Okay, okayyy!" Derrick giggles. "Lemme find that coke. You girls get your fuckin' clothes off—"

It's the girls who spot me first when Derrick flicks on the lights. They scream blue murder, which has *him* screaming blue murder, then all three of them turn to where I'm calmly sitting at the table in the motel room's kitchenette.

"*You* and *you*," I say quietly, gesturing at each girl in turn with the gun in my hand. "Come. Here."

When they hesitate, looking terrified, I sigh, slip a hand into my jacket pocket, and pull out a folded wad of cash. I start to count it, but then just say fuck it and drop it on the table in front of me.

"This is yours. In exchange, tonight never happened. You never saw this man." I point the gun at Derrick. "And you *definitely* never saw me. How's that sound?"

The two of them look at the money, then at each other. It takes about one second for them to shrug, walk over to the table, and pick up the cash.

"Smart." I smile coldly. "Now it's time to leave."

The girls quickly run out the door. Derrick starts to follow but I cock the gun, stopping him cold.

"*Surely* you didn't think that included you, *Derrick*," I growl quietly. "Or is it Mike Brommer down here? Or—no. Don't tell me. Carl Willoughby."

His throat works as his face pales.

“W-what do you want?”

“*Sit*,” I murmur, tapping the table across from me. “Right here. Right now.”

He shuffles over, pulls the chair out and drops into it.

“N-now what?” he stutters.

I take a deep breath, looking at him with cold eyes. “Now it's story time, Derrick. This is a good one. It’s about a girl—beautiful, smart, braver than most. She doesn’t let life break her spirit, even when it beats her the fuck down and grinds her under its heel. She’s….incredible that way.”

I take another breath.

“She’s also a *phenomenal* dancer.” I sigh, chuckling quietly. “I mean, you should see her, Derrick. She’s unbelievable. *So* goddamn talented.”

He smiles weakly. “She… She sounds great.”

I smile coldly at him. “You know, Derrick, she *is*. And the thing is, *you fucking know her*.” The smile drops from my face. “It’s *Brooklyn*, you piece of shit.”

Every drop of color drains from his face. His eyes bulge, looking bloodshot and haggard even as fear coils in them.

It wasn’t difficult to find him, although he *is* going by another name down here—Mark Jepson. Because it wasn’t hard to find *Diego*, not when I told him I wanted to hire a whole team of world-class financial forensics experts to work on Brooklyn’s stepfather's case and that I’d pay whatever it took. Greedy little fuck threw out forty grand as a number, and I told him I’d meet him with the cash.

…That's when I beat the living fuck out of him, broke every bone in both hands, and told him if I ever saw him anywhere near the tri-state area again, I’d cut off his head.

And he *gladly* gave up his accomplice.

Derrick’s eyes grow wider by the second as the full magnitude of the shit he’s stepped in really washes over him.

“Okay—wait —I can explain—”

“I’m not interested in explanations,” I say quietly. “I’m not actually interested in *anything* you might feel compelled to say. Shut your fucking mouth and listen to me.” I level a cold look at him. “Ripping off military widows and retirees is pretty low, Derrick. But scamming your own fucking *stepdaughter*?” I shake my head. “Do you have any idea what she’s done just to survive over the last year or so? How hard she’s been treading water, just to keep her nose barely above it? All so *you* could rip her off month after month for…what, *coke money*?” I snarl.

Derrick starts to cry. I don’t give a single flying fuck.

“Stop fucking sniveling, asshole,” I hiss. When he keeps at it, I pound my fist on the table. “*You don’t get to be sad, motherfucker!!*” I roar. He chokes, trying to hold back the tears with a terrified look on his face.

“*Please*,” he whimpers. “If…just…” He glances at the gun in my hand. “Just make it fast?”

I chuckle. “Oh, *this*? No no no, Derrick,” I sigh. “I’m not going to kill you. For a start, although you were terrible at it, I’m giving you a *small* fucking pass for at least trying with Brooklyn when she was a kid, after her mother died. You were a shitty caregiver, but you at least kept a roof over her head, and *some* food in her mouth.” I shake my head. “But also, I won’t kill you simply because you’re the only family she has left. I won’t take that from her.”

He starts to relax until I use the gun to push the little pad of paper and pen across the table to him.

“*You* will.”

He blinks in stunned, scared confusion.

“You’re going to disappear, Derrick,” I growl quietly. “For good. But before that, you’re going to write Brooklyn a letter.”

He starts to nod eagerly, but I hold up a hand. “Let me finish, or I’ll blow off one of your testicles.”

He freezes.

“In this letter, you’re going to tell her that your crimes were far worse than you said. That you hadn't been charged with grand larceny, but with sexual assault on a child. Let's make that several children, actually.”

He looks at me in horror. “*W-what*?! I would *never*—”

I cock the gun, making him jump.

“What you are, in fact, *never* going to do,” I growl, “is let that poor girl know that she’s been lowering herself to levels she never imagined she’d have to, just so you could *scam* her. Because it would break her.” I grit my teeth and lean forward. “Disgusting her is the lesser of two evils for you here, Derrick. If you break her…” I shake my head. “Well, there’s no hell I could threaten you with that would even come *close* to what I’d put you through.”

I nod at the paper and pen. “So: you’ll tell her you’re a disgusting child abusing piece of shit. You’ve been hiding your true crimes from her, and Diego has been a part of that at your request. You’ll tell her you’re sorry for doing what you did and being what you are, and that you hate yourself. You’ll say that you have made bail, but your intentions are to go on the run, because you’re terrified to face prison after everything you’ve done.”

Derrick crumples, his face gaunt as he stares at the piece of paper.

“What happens after I write the letter?” he chokes.

“You *disappear*,” I growl. “And I do mean disappear. You find the most remote place on Earth, you dig yourself a nice little hole there, and you fucking *stay* in that hole until you die. Because if I ever hear about you, even *know* anyone who hears about you, there is no length to which I won’t go to drag you through a hell you cannot even imagine. Is that clear enough even for you?”

He nods pitifully, not meeting my eyes.

“Good. Now write the fucking letter. Don’t leave anything out.”

He swallows as he picks up the pen. Then he glances up at me. “How is she?” he murmurs quietly. “I mean, is she—”

“She’s no longer someone you're allowed to think about. You forfeited that privilege when you put her through hell just to scam her.” I level a dark look at him as I tap the table with the gun. “*Write*, motherfucker.”

* * *

It’s like a knife to my chest when I see her crumple a week later, reading the letter mailed to our house from Florida.

If she hurts, I hurt, even though I know this is a pain I’m technically behind.

But honestly, there was no option here that *didn’t* hurt her. Behind door number one, Derrick disappoints her *and* makes her a victim yet again. One more instance of a man using her innate desire to see the best in the world to hurt her. Door number two, he just…disappoints her.

Picking that lie over the truth is one of the hardest decisions I’ve ever had to make. But my priority now is *her*, and her safety.

And again, that includes her heart and spirit. There was no way I was going to let that motherfucker rip her off for a year and *also* crush both those things.

All that matters is that she knows Derrick is a piece of shit, and that he’s out of her life for good.

A few days after the letter, she slowly starts becoming an even brighter version of herself. It’s like a final weight has been lifted from her chest or the last shadowy cloud has been cleared from the sky, and she can finally turn the page on that black chapter of her life, and our new one together can truly begin.

After a long night of deliberating, we decide that we’re done hiding this from people. I don’t give a fuck what anyone thinks about it, and neither does she.

So, we go public.

…In a very, very big way.

We don’t bother easing into it slowly. Everyone’s going to talk anyway, right?

So the grand reveal ends up being Laz Kislev’s birthday party at Doomsday Club, which he’s a part owner of.

Yes, there are open-mouthed stares when Brooklyn and I walk in, my arm around her waist. *Yes*, she’s pulled away by her friends almost immediately, who not-so-quietly hurl *a thousand* questions at her.

…*Yes*, I’m within earshot when Val Bancroft asks her if I’m “giving her that big dick on the reg.” I feel it's my place to answer, so I do, loudly, over the din of the party.

That brings *another* whole explosion of squeals and laughter and wide-eyed questions, while Evelina turns an interesting shade of scarlet.

Eventually, though, it all blends into a blur, and I find myself weirdly content: sitting in one of Doomsday's VIP booths, a drink in my hand, the woman I’m fucking *crazy* about wrapped up in my other arm with her head on my shoulder.

Life is perfect.

…Until it’s not.

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43

BROOKLYN

"So…"

Maya grins at me in the mirror while she adjusts her black PVC thigh highs and bikini bottom.

"I hear there's something a little…*scandalous* in your life?"

I smirk, arching my brows from where I'm sitting in her dressing room chair.

"That feels a bit judgy coming from the sexy nun with her boobs out."

Maya, who is indeed in the middle of trying on her new fetish-heavy sexy nun outfit for later tonight, laughs and grabs her tits. "Don't be jealous, Ms. B-cups."

Kir would lose his *shit* if he knew I was back here at The Mirage. I'm actually surprised myself, given all the horrible things that happened here.

But, Maya—a friend I wasn't looking for but desperately needed—*also* happened here. So when she texted me asking if I wanted to catch up tonight before her shift…and mentioned that Lou wasn't going to be in…I said screw it.

I'm glad I did.

Yes, the horrifying memories might come clawing for me, being here again. But I feel better equipped now to fight them off.

I’m stronger.

I’m not afraid of the ghosts anymore. I can look back on the girl who walked in here in utter desperation, and while she breaks my heart, I’m so proud of how far she’s come.

…I mean, she’s had some help, from an incredible man. But still.

I’m fucking proud of her.

I snort as Maya cups her boobs and gives them a jiggle in the mirror. “I mean, I *am* jealous. They’re fantastic tits.” I shrug. “But if I had those, there’s no way I could do ballet. Did I ever tell you about the girl I danced with who had a boob *reduction* because they kept throwing off her pirouettes?”

She clicks her teeth. “See? The tits are always greener on the other side.”

I grin. Maya finishes adjusting the buckles on her PVC bra. Then she shoots me a look. “By the way, nice dodge of my ultra-probing question just now.”

I feel my face heat. “What?”

She sighs. “I heard a rumor about a new man in your life.”

I grin, blushing deeper. “Oh?”

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t fucking *oh* me, bitch. I stalk your friends on Insta and caught a pic from a birthday party the other day for some guy named… Lazarus?”

I laugh. “Just Laz.”

“Yeah, well, surprise surprise, who do I see in the background of said post? You—lookin *smoking*, by the way—”

“Thanks.”

“Sitting in the lap of a *super-hot* guy who looked…what…fifteen years older than you?”

I grin. “Twenty-one, actually.”

“*Girl*,” she laughs. “Fuck the haters. *Go get it*. That dude is *fine*.” Her brow cocks. “And…if I’m not mistaken, he’s also the guy who marched in here that last night of yours and beat the living fuck out of Lou?”

I chew on my lip. “That would be him.”

“And the same smoke-show who came looking for you at my apartment?”

I grin and nod.

Maya throws her head back and cackles. “Does he have a brother?”

I snicker. “No, sorry. I’ll keep an ear out for any cousins, though.”

“Please do.” She turns, her eyes sweeping over me as she smiles.

“What?”

“Happiness looks good on you, that's all.”

I roll my eyes. “Please. That *outfit* looks good on you.”

“Well, duh,” she smirks. “And stop deflecting with humor.” She arches a brow. “You do that a lot, you know. But yeah… Happiness suits you.” She smiles. “You *are* happy, right?”

A huge grin spreads across my face. “*Really* fucking happy.”

Maya grins back. “You’ve grown *a lot* since you got out of this place.”

I smile wryly. “Ever think about leaving yourself?”

She gestures around the dressing room. “And leave all this? Look, Lou's a fucking predator, but he’s also scared of me. The clients are gross sometimes, but…” She shrugs. “I dunno. I fuckin’ love this place. I love being on that stage, I love looking out for the other girls… I just feel at home here, even if I want to give it a deep clean and take out some of the trash sometimes.”

She glances at the clock, sighing. “Showtime. Look, Lou really is gone for a few days. You wanna hang out after I’m done? Head somewhere fun, get some stupid pink girly drinks?”

I grin. “I’d *love* to.”

After she sashays out of the dressing room, guilt hits me. Kir doesn’t know I’m here, and it’s weighing on me.

Just then, two dancers I don’t think I ever worked with come bustling into the dressing room, giving me odd looks. I excuse myself and head out to the back parking lot to call Kir, tell him where I am and that I’m *fine* about it, and that I’ll be going out with Maya for a couple drinks after.

The muggy summer air hits me as I open the back door and step out, reaching into my pocket for my phone.

Then pain explodes through my stomach and I see black spots as I keel over, crying out in agony when the fist slams into my gut again.

A rough hand grabs the back of my hair, shoving me down to my hands and knees on the blacktop, a cold, furious, all-too-familiar voice snarling in my ear.

“Miss me, *bitch*?”

I scream as James yanks me up by the hair and shoves me toward the open trunk of a car.

“I think we’ve got a *lot* of catching up to do, don’t you?”

I scream again as he shoves me into the trunk and slams it shut, drowning me in darkness as terror rips me apart.

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44

KIR

I BRACE myself as I take the corner so fast that the Aston Martin almost goes up on two wheels. The car fishtails, my lips pulling into a snarl as I wrestle control back and gun the engine, hurtling toward Greenpoint.

They say bad things happen in threes. The first was the call from the guy I'd been paying to keep an eye on James in the oilfields in northern Canada. His early reports, when James first arrived, brought nothing but smiles to my face: James had gotten the shit kicked out of him on day one for not respecting the pecking order in the chow line, then gotten his ass beat *the next day*, too, when word started to get around that he was a predatory sex pest.

Delightful tales involving various other oil workers kicking the shit out of him kept up for the last couple of weeks. Then, twenty minutes ago, I got a call that did *not* put a smile on my face at all.

Apparently, James' beatings got so bad that he was sent to the infirmary. And twenty-four hours later, the doctor realized *James wasn't there anymore*.

I tried to tell myself that New York would be the last place that fucker would come, being that he barely escaped charges for propositioning a minor—who's *not* actually a minor, but he doesn't know that.

But that was before the *second* call I got, from Maya, Brooklyn's friend from The Mirage. She's the one who filled me in that Brooklyn had come to see her, and that they'd planned to get drinks after Maya's shift, but then

Brooklyn had vanished, and when Maya went looking for her, she'd found her phone cracked on the pavement in the back parking lot next to some tire skid-marks.

Venom and fire roar through my veins as I scream around another corner, blast through a stop sign, and screech to a stop behind The Mirage.

Bad things come in threes.…

If he's hurt her…if he's touched *one fucking hair on her head*…

I shut off the engine and jump out of the car.

"Kir?!"

I've only met Maya once, when I went to her apartment looking for Brooklyn. But I can tell instantly that she cares about Brooklyn almost as much as I do. She looks freaked the fuck *out* as she sprints over to me from the back door.

"Right there," she blurts, pointing to a spot on the blacktop. "Some of the girls in the dressing room said she'd gone outside to make a call, but that's where I found her phone." She looks up at me with wild, pleading eyes. "I don't know what…I don't…oh my *God—*"

"Breathe," I growl, forcing calm that I don't feel into my voice. "Did you ever know James?"

Maya's face says it all.

"*Yeah*," she hisses. "I knew the motherfucker. But I heard he was dodging something gross like trying to pick up a minor and ran to Siberia or something?

"The Yukon," I growl. "And he's not there anymore."

Her face pales. "*What*?"

"He left the mining camp he was hiding out at, and…." I glance down at the tire marks on the ground before my gaze locks with Maya's.

"You think this was *James*?!" she blurts, horrified.

“I think if you know *anything* about him, you need to tell me. *Now*,” I growl. Then I point to the camera over the back door. “Does that work?”

Maya nods. “Yeah. Come on.”

In the office, she calls up the footage and rewinds it. My blood turns to acid and her breath catches as we watch that piece of shit sucker-punch Brooklyn in the stomach twice, then drag her over to the car and shove her into the trunk.

The world sort of fades away when I see that. So much so that I’m not even aware what's happened until I’m blinking in confusion at the pain in my fist, and wondering where the three new jagged holes in the wall came from.

Maya swallows uneasily, eyeing me. “I know he used to live in Bushwick. On Dekalb. Near the hipster bowling alley?”

“Thank you,” I growl, yanking out my phone.

“Kir?” Freya croaks sleepily into the phone. It’s noon in Kyoto, which is literally the middle of the night for my nocturnal daughter.

“Frey, it’s an emergency. It’s Brooklyn.”

“*Fuck*. Gimme a sec.” Her voice becomes much more alert. I hear shuffling and Mal grunting “who is it” in the background, then a flurry of keyboard strokes.

“Okay,” Freya says. “What do you need?”

“I need you to track a license plate. Belongs to her ex. The fucker I had sent to Canada.” Maya rewinds the tape, and I rattle off the number to Freya. Then I hang up and call Isaak. The plate trace is going to be the most accurate, but in case James heads to familiar territory, I have Isaak bring a few carloads of guys to Bushwick to start canvasing that stretch of Dekalb Avenue. I have other men sent anywhere else I think James might go—his uncle’s office at the port, a friend’s apartment, anything.

Maya stays at The Mirage, to be at ground zero. I jump back into the car, my blood searing like napalm in my veins I peel away, dialing Freya again.

“Narrowing in!” she blurts into the phone. “Not everywhere has those newer speed cameras like in Manhattan, so I’m running image recognition on still frame captures. Taking a little longer than I want—oh! Got a hit!”

“Where?!”

“The Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, heading south.”

I spin the wheel, screeching the car into a U-turn and crossing the meridian before I gun the engine and roar through Greenpoint into Williamsburg. I catch the expressway there, weaving through traffic like a madman.

“Another hit on the BQE!” Freya yells. “And another—a traffic light in Red Hook fifteen minutes ago!”

Fifteen minutes. Fuck.

The car roars down the exit ramp into Red Hook. Freya finds another still photograph of James’ plate near a shipping yard close to the old docks, so that's where I go, my hands gripping the wheel like iron, my pulse thudding like a war drum in my ears as I scan the crumbling old warehouses.

It’s the gate that gives it away—the one hanging open on rusty hinges, with a freshly cut lock. The Aston Martin tears through it, tires spewing gravel as I roar past old shipping containers and screech around a corner.

NO.

James looks up wide-eyed when my headlights flood the scene. Brooklyn is sprawled across the hood of his car, face down, her pants at her knees, his hand between her legs.

My car has barely stopped moving before I’m out and charging him like a runaway train. The breath leaves his body in a *whoosh* when I collide into him, knocking him off his feet and smashing him to the ground.

Then I rain down holy *hell* on him.

I hit him until my fists go numb, his face turns to bloody pulp and I hear his ribs cracking. It’s only when he's lying limp on the ground that I lurch away from him and rush over to Brooklyn.

“*Babygirl—*”

“I—I’m—”

She’s curled on the ground, shaking, her pants still down and her arms wrapped around her body when I reach her. For a second, I’m worried that even my touch is going to break her. But when I go to put my arms around her, she instantly clutches me tightly, like I’m the only thing tethering her to the world.

“H-he tried…” she sobs into my chest. “But… I fought him. *I fucking fought him, Kir*!”

“*It’s okay, babygirl,*” I murmur softly, stroking her hair as I pull her into my arms right there on the ground. She clings to me, crying into my chest. I just hold her, and kiss the top of her head, and tell her that nothing in this world will ever hurt her again.

Gingerly, I help her to her feet, and she pulls her pants back up. I gently lead her to my car, and text Freya that I have her. My jaw tightens when I see the ugly purple bruise swelling over one eye, and the cut on her lip.

“I have to go do something,” I say quietly as I buckle Brooklyn into the passenger seat. Her hands tighten on mine. “I will be *right back,*” I growl.

She nods quickly, her eyes still teary but fierce as I lean in to kiss her cheek.

Then I turn and slowly walk to where James is lying on the ground. His face is destroyed, but his one good eye slowly swivels toward me, and he blubbers when he sees me calmly pull my gun out of my jacket, cock it, and point it down at him.

“When you get to hell,” I growl icily, “keep looking over your shoulder. Because when I get there, I’m going to find you, and we’re going to do this again, and again, and *again*.”

Then I do what I should have done the first time.

He chokes on blood, screaming through his shattered face and writhing when I blow his dick off with the first shot. The next two go through his head, and the whole grisly scene goes quiet.

I text Isaak to call off the search and triple security around my house. Then I walk back to the car. I hold her hand tightly as we drive away from the docks, her head resting against my shoulder.

“Let’s go home, babygirl.”

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KIR

I HELP her undress and lower her into the warm, sudsy bathtub water. The cut on her lip isn't that bad after I've cleaned it, though she'll have some swelling. The black eye is pretty vicious, though, and that will take some time.

But she'll heal.

That little fucker tried, but she fought him so hard that he didn't even get his pants down before I arrived. Thank fucking *God*.

"If you want to be alone—"

"That's the last thing I want," she croaks, her hand shooting out of the water to grip my wrist tightly.

I smile as I get on my knees next to the tub, my hand twisting to hold hers, shaking my head. "Then I'm not going anywhere," I murmur, reaching out to stroke her cheek.

I roll my sleeves up and ease her back in the water. I lather her hair with shampoo and slowly rinse it out, then conditioner. Then I gently clean every inch of her body, running my hands over her as if to reclaim each piece of her.

"What are you…*oh*…" She smiles as she sinks deep into the bubbles, letting me pull her leg out of the water and lather it with shaving cream. I use my razor to gently shave one leg, then the other, then under her arms.

Lastly, I have her sit on the edge of the tub and gently clean away the stubble on her pussy—her request.

Then I carry her wrapped in a towel back to our bed and settle her into the sheets.

"*Kir*?" The quiet frailty in her voice breaks me as her fingers entwine with mine. Her big blue eyes hold my gaze. "Will you stay here with me?"

"Of course, babygirl," I murmur.

I ditch my clothes and slide into bed next to her. Brooklyn snuggles into me, then goes still against my body. Her lips brush my chest in a soft kiss. Then another. When I feel her tongue drag over my skin, I glance down at her, my eyebrow arching when I see the smoldering fire in her gaze.

"I think tonight you might just want—"

"What I want," she breathes, "is *you*." She kisses my chest again, her gaze locked on mine as her tongue slides out and teases over my nipple.

"Baby—"

"I need to feel *you*," she says tightly. "*Your* hands on me. *Your* mouth."

She slides her leg over mine, shifting until she's straddling my hips, our eyes still fixed on each other. With a low growl, I slide my hand up her jaw into her hair and pull her possessively to me. I kiss her, gently at first, but Brooklyn grabs my face and crushes her mouth to mine, kissing me fiercely and deeply.

"*Don't hold back*," she moans. "I want *you*, not a watered down version."

She whimpers as I kiss her, then slides her lips down my jaw to my ear. "*Make it hurt, sir…please.*" Her lips tease against mine. "*Spank me, sir*."

The thing is, I understand what she needs, because I understand what this dynamic of ours is to her. She *craves* my dominance just as I crave her submission. She wants the rush of pain and control, because she knows with me, she's ultimately in charge. *She* decides when it stops if it's too much. She alone says where that line is.

So that’s why I don’t hesitate when I wind my hand back and send it crashing down on her ass. Brooklyn squeals in pain and pleasure, her back arching, sending her tits thrusting into my face. I wrap my lips around one tight, pink nipple and bite down as my hand smacks her other cheek harshly.

Brooklyn moans and cries out, twisting on my lap as I savage first one nipple and then the other. My hand smacks her ass over and over, turning the soft pale skin red and hot. Finally, with a groan, I roughly shove her across my lap, my thick cock bulging against her stomach as her tight little ass rises eagerly in the air.

She squeals when my open palm crashes to her skin.

“Is this what you wanted, little sinner?” I growl.

“*Yes!!*” she moans, desperately arching her back. “Please punish me, sir!”

My palm smacks her ass again and again, spreading dappled pink across her skin until it’s a fiery red. I slip my hand between her legs, stroking her absolutely *soaking* cunt.

“Do you feel how fucking hard I am for this pretty pussy?” I growl as I spread her open. “How hard my cock is for you?”

Brooklyn whimpers as I sink two fingers into her tight wetness, sawing them in and out, groaning at the sight of her pussy lips wrapped tight around them.

My dick pulses against her stomach, smearing precum all over her skin as I slide my fingers out and spank her ass twice more.

“Now be a good girl and swallow every fucking inch of my fucking cock with this tight little hole.”

She’s on me in a second, her legs spreading to either side of mine. I grab her wrists, pinning them to the small of her back with one hand as I use the other to guide my swollen cock into her pussy. The thick head spreads her open, and a soft whine tumbles from her throat as she slides down every goddamn inch of me, until my balls are pressed right to her ass.

“*Oh fuuuuck…*”

“Ride me, babygirl,” I growl. “Show me how good girls take a big dick.”

She starts to bounce on my cock, her whole body writhing as she rolls her hips up and down. Her sweet pussy strangles my swollen dick as she slides up and down. I keep her hands pinned behind her back, taking away her control as I rock my hips up to meet hers, pounding her tight little cunt.

My teeth are everywhere, biting her nipples, dragging over her collarbone, nibbling at her neck, making her scream as she begs me for more.

“*Fuck me harder, sir*!” she cries out. “*Harder!*”

With a savage growl, I roll us over, pinning her to the mattress. I shove her wrists over her head, keeping them there with both hands as I start to pound into her with brutal, savage thrusts. Brooklyn cries out, her legs wrapped around my hips, her pussy squeezing my dick tightly as I fuck her hard.

Our bodies rock and grind together, her nipples dragging across my chest. I keep her arms pinned with one hand and bring the other to her throat. I swear her cunt tightens even *more* when I wrap my fingers around her neck, squeezing just enough for a low, guttural moan to fall from her lips as her eyes roll back.

“*Oh fuck! Oh fuck! Oh....fuuuuucck!!*”

I groan when I feel her shatter around me, her pussy spasming as the orgasm erupts though her core.

I just keep fucking her, pounding my swollen cock into her over and over, until all I know is the sweet, velvety, snug kiss of her pussy.

“*Kir!!*”

When she comes again, her walls clenching and rippling, I’m right there with her. Her body arches off the bed as I drive in balls-deep, crushing my mouth to hers. My cock swells and pulses, pumping rope after rope of cum deep inside her. Her tongue snakes with mine, her ankles crossed behind my back as her pussy milks the last drops of cum from my dick.

She’s still shuddering as I slowly kiss my way down her jaw, her neck, her collarbone. I trail my mouth down to her breasts, making her whimper as I suck a nipple between my lips and roll my tongue over it.

Her flat belly tightens when I kiss my way down across it.

“*Kir…*”

She whimpers softly as I spread her legs wide and dip down between them. My tongue drags over her freshly fucked, swollen pussy, pushing deep before I wrap my lips around her clit. My tongue snakes around her clit, and when I start to suck, her body melts under me.

“*Holy shit…*”

Her heavy breathing mixed with her moans fills my ears as her hips begin to push against my mouth. I coax her higher and higher, tonguing her pussy and mercilessly teasing her clit until suddenly she’s coming again, grinding her cunt against my mouth as she screams her release.

It’s only then that I slide back up, wrapping her in my arms and searing my lips to hers. Our tongues dance, tasting her cum and mine together as her arms and legs wind around me.

Then we do it all over again.

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BROOKLYN

A SHIVER RUNS down my spine when I reach for him and realize he's not there.

I roll over and pluck my cracked phone from the nightstand. I blink at it, frowning when I see it's almost three-thirty in the morning. I'm about to go look for Kir when I get a new email notification.

My heart skips.

It's a scheduling reminder from Liliya Rostova, the Ballet Mistress of the *Imperiya Korona*, for my callback with her and Ivan in just two weeks.

My pulse jumps as a mix of excitement and anxiety flickers through me.

Then my brows knit as I glance around the room.

Where is he?

I wrap myself in the duvet and quietly prowl through the house. He's not in his office, or anywhere downstairs. Finally, I catch sight of him out on the ivy-covered veranda off the library.

"And here I thought I'd worn you out," I say shyly, slipping out to join him.

Kir glances up, flashing one of his sinfully sexy smiles. "Just enjoying the view."

"How is it?"

“*Radically* improved in the last three seconds.”

I smile, settling back against his body, pushing the duvet aside to rest my cheek on his bare chest.

“Why have you and Dimitri Moskovic been fighting?”

I can feel his chest rise and fall as he takes a slow, deep breath.

“I don’t even know if we remember anymore. Our fathers were enemies. We’re friendly enough at times, but occasionally business goes sour, or deals and territory are taken by force.” He shakes his head. “It’s become stupid enough that we’re both ready for a peace to reset the board and start over as allies.”

“So…this truce…” I swallow. “You get Inessa into the ballet, and there’s peace? Like, *that’s* the deal?”

Kir nods thoughtfully. “That’s how the Bratva frequently works,” he growls. “It’s symbolic, yes, but it’s a way to bury the hatchet. So, symbolic, but *necessary*.”

My eyebrows knit. “Are there any other terms?”

He looks away. I reach for his chin, sliding my fingers up his jaw and gently pulling his gaze back to me.

“I’m going to reach out to Ivan,” he murmurs. “Maybe there’s a way…” He shakes his head. “I’m going to figure this out, babygirl.”

“Inessa is *very* good,” I whisper. “Better than me, honestly. Or at least at the same level, and that’s me being kind to myself. She’s *worked* for it.”

“I can talk to Ivan. Call in some favors, or—”

“I don’t *want* favors. I want to get in on my own merit.” My eyes find his, frowning slightly. “What other terms are there, Kir?” I say quietly.

His gaze locks with mine, black clashing with blue.

“Inessa goes to the *Ballet Imperiya Korona*. Dimitri drops all business interests in New York and never returns.” His jaw tightens. “And I do the same in Russia.”

I freeze, my eyes widening. “So if I get in—”

“Stop it,” he growls.

“No, Kir—”

“I am *not* worth throwing your dream away for, babygirl,” he says with a wry smile. “Trust me.”

I gaze at him steadfastly. “*Yes, you are*.”

He sighs deeply, his arms tightening around me and his hands sliding up and down the bare skin of my back and tangling in my hair in the way that I love.

“It’s easy to say that at your age—”

“Don’t do that,” I snap. “Don’t make me out to be a naive little girl.”

He shakes his head. “I’m *not*, but there are complexities of life you don’t encounter until you’re older—”

“Then I’ll figure them out *with you*,” I hiss. “I don’t want to be away from you,” I whisper, leaning my forehead to his. “I don’t want to go to Moscow if you can’t come with me.”

“This is your future—”

“No, *you* are my future,” I choke, my heart racing. “Because—”

“I love you.”

I jolt when the words fall from his lips. My eyes lock with his, light blue rioting with devil dark, as my jaw drops.

“*I love you, Brooklyn*,” he murmurs again.

“You *asshole*!” I choke through a cracking smile, tears beading in my eyes. “I was going to say it first and then you totally stole—”

“Yeah,” he growls, cupping my chin and pulling me close. “I guess I did.”

“*I love you, too*,” I murmur quietly as his lips find mine, devouring my protests and swallowing my moans as we tangle together under the

moonlight.

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KIR

I LOVE HER.

Which is why I have to do this.

I lower my face to her sleeping one, softly kissing her cheek and tucking the duvet around her shoulders.

Then it’s time.

Dimitri stands from the table in the back of his restaurant when I walk in. I shake his hand firmly before we sit.

“I appreciate you meeting me so early, Dimitri.”

He chuckles. “Eh, I’ve always been an early bird. It’s easier to see what I’d like to conquer next in the morning light.”

I smile, dipping my chin.

“So.” He clears his throat and pours tea from a samovar into a cup for me, then one for him. “What was it you wanted to discuss?”

I take a slow, deep breath. “Dimitri, I say this with the *utmost respect* for you, but I’m afraid our deal is no longer on the table.”

His brow furrows deeply. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

He blinks in confusion, staring at me. “But…*why*, Kir? This arrangement is extremely beneficial to both of us, *da*? We both get what we want. Why the *fuck*, if you’ll pardon my language, would you call it off?”

My jaw sets. “Because as much as I want to bury the hatchet…” I shrug. “Love, Dimitri,” I say plainly. “Love is why.”

A curious smile pulls at his mouth.

“*Innnteresting*,” he says, slowly nodding. “You know, I was at the charity ball the other day…Viktor Komarov’s fundraiser?”

“Really.”

He keeps nodding. “And I have to say…” He smiles a crooked grin. “Your date looked familiar. She’s with the Zakharova, isn’t she?”

When my eyes narrow, he raises his hands apologetically.

“I mean nothing malicious by that. I’m just quite dialed in to my Inessa’s dancing, and I know *all* her top competition for that apprenticeship. Including Ms. Ellis.” He looks at me pointedly. “She’s very talented.”

I nod. “They’re *both* extremely talented, Dimitri.” I exhale. “Look, I spoke with Ivan this morning. He’s just got one opening for now, but there may be another in a year and a half. I’m sorry, Dimitri, but I have to do what I have to do, and I hope you can understand that.”

Dimitri nods quietly, his eyes meeting mine. “You know walking away from this deal could mean war?”

I nod. “I do.”

“It could mean me burning your empire to *ash*,” he says bluntly.

“I know that, too.” With a sigh, I push my chair back, stand, and button my jacket. Dimitri also rises, and I shake his hand. “I’m sorry that this is the way this has to play out, Dimitri. Truly.” I smile ruefully. “The things we do for love, hmm?”

He just nods quietly as I turn to head for the door.

“You would *really* give it all up for this girl?”

I pause, turning to look at him. “And then some,” I murmur.

“Kir.”

Dimitri walks over to me, a bemused expression on his face as his eyes lock with mine. “You’re serious? You would risk losing *all of it* for her?”

“I am, and I would,” I say quietly. “It’s not even a tough choice.” I draw in a breath as I extend my hand. Dimitri takes it, the look of bewilderment still on his face as I shake it firmly. “I’m sorry, Dimitri. I really am.”

Then I walk out the door.

I’ve only taken five steps before my phone rings with a call from Ivan.

“Your ears must have been burning, my friend,” I chuckle as I answer. “Just the man I was about to call.”

“Twice in one day?” Ivan says with a smile in his tone. “Another question about the openings in my company?”

I shake my head. “No. This time, I’d like to formally call in that favor we always joke about.” I sigh. “There’s a dancer I’ve been mentoring—Brooklyn Ellis. She’s already auditioned once for Liliya, and I believe she has a callback—”

“The same Brooklyn Ellis who just called me?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not sure what’s going on, Kir. But as much as I’d love to honor the favor I owe you…well, I can’t here. Brooklyn just called me and bowed out.”

“She *what*?”

“She bowed out. She thanked me for the opportunity, I asked if she was sure, she said she was, and that was that.”

What the FUCK, Brooklyn.

Just then, the door to the restaurant opens behind me.

“Kir—a word,” Dimitri says.

“Ivan? I’ll call you back.”

I hang up, my face a mask of puzzlement as I turn to face Dimitri.

He sighs heavily. “Enough of this, Kir,” he growls. “This is our fathers’ pigheadedness, not ours. So, let’s settle this without anyone owing anyone. You want New York, I want Moscow. There’s no disagreement there, is there?”

I shake my head. “None at all.”

I had my fill of my home country a *long* time ago.

Dimitri nods. “My Inessa is a fine dancer, but so is Brooklyn. How about we say no favors, and we stop tying *their* futures to *our* bullshit. They both audition for that one slot of Ivan’s, and whoever he picks—”

“Inessa is going to Moscow, Dimitri,” I say quietly.

His eyes widen. “But—”

“The decision, it would seem, has been made for us.” I shrug. “Brooklyn called Ivan and withdrew from the auditions. I would imagine that spot is Inessa’s, if she wants it. From what I’ve heard, she very much deserves it.”

Dimitri chuckles and claps me on the shoulder. “You love this girl?”

“More than anything.”

He grins. “You’re going to have your hands full with her, my friend.”

Don’t I know it.

The two of us formally shake on our new agreement and promise to keep communication open while our people get the necessary paperwork together.

“I’m still going to endorse Inessa to Ivan,” I tell him. “I know she doesn’t need it, but—”

“The gesture is appreciated,” Dimitri says, dipping his chin. Then his brow furrows. “There’s one more thing. Lou Cassavetti. He hurt your girl, didn’t he?”

“He did,” I growl.

Dimitri’s face darkens. “He’s yours, then. I’ve been keeping him at one of my safe houses in Queens. I didn’t know all the things he’s done, and I needed him to finish cleaning my financials here in New York. After he was attacked—”

“In the interests of transparency, you should know that was me, Dimitri,” I growl.

His mouth sours. “But he was hurting Brooklyn?”

I nod.

“Then he’s dead to me. I’ll text you the address of the safe house and let my men outside know that they can…take a break.”

I smile grimly as I shake his hand. “Thank you.”

“I look forward to turning a new page, my friend.”

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48

KIR

THERE'S no dramatic final speeches or anything. I have Lou sobbing and writhing like a fucking worm on his knees in the metal scrapyard an hour later.

He's trying to beg for mercy, I assume. It's hard to tell with his bloody, severed dick stuffed in his mouth.

He can beg for all the mercy in the universe.

He'll get none from me.

I shoot his hands first, for daring to touch her. Lou squeals and sobs and squirms. I just look at him with disgust for a few long moments before I level the gun at his head and put a final bullet through his skull.

I kick his limp body into the waiting trunk of a junk car, then turn to nod at Isaak, waiting in the control cab of the giant metallic arm. The steel spikes of the claw bite into the old Buick, lifting it up and dropping it into the compactor.

I smile grimly as I push the button and then watch as both the car and Lou's mangled body are crushed to dust.

That dance is done.

I grin as I walk to my car.

And a new one is just beginning.

* * *

APPARENTLY TODAY'S rehearsal is taking place out on stage, rather than in the studio. The full company is scattered across it, some stretching on the floor, but the majority of them going through their movements as Magda claps her hands sharply to keep the rehearsal pianist in time.

My pulse thunders in my ears as I storm down the aisle toward the stage.

"Madame Kuzmina!" I say loudly.

Magda stops clapping, turning to me with a frown.

"Mr. Nikolayev?"

"Madame, I apologize for intruding on your rehearsal, but I need to speak with Ms. Ellis. *Right now*."

A titter of giggles and gasps ripples through the crowd as I march to the stage and deftly vault up onto it.

Brooklyn's face is heated as she slips out from behind Val Bancroft and Dove Marchetti. Her teeth drag over her bottom lip as she smiles curiously at me.

"I said *now,* Ms. Ellis," I growl, smirking a little as I beckon with two fingers.

She walks over to me before she comes to a stop, arching a brow in confusion. She blushes wildly as she looks up at me. "*Kir*…"

"You turned down Moscow."

Her throat works as she tries to decipher the expression on my face.

"Yeah," she finally says quietly. "I did. You're more important."

My jaw clenches. "*Babygirl*, I'm not—"

"Besides, I don't need to run. I don't—" She frowns, her eyes dropping to my chest. "There's blood on your shirt."

“It’s not mine.”

When her eyes snap to mine, I just nod.

“*Lou*,” I mouth quietly.

A grin cracks across her lips, spreading in that way that makes my heart soar.

“I bowed out of Moscow because I don’t need to run anymore.” She looks up into my eyes as my hands take hers. “*You killed all my monsters*.”

“And I’ll keep doing so,” I murmur.

She swallows. “I’m *obviously* still going to dance—”

“You'd better.”

Brooklyn smiles widely. “So I’m going to stay here with the Zakharova.” She winks as she pulls closer to me. “I don’t know if you're aware, but it’s actually a *world-class company*.”

“So I hear,” I murmur, grinning at her.

Brooklyn’s lip catches in her teeth. “Moscow isn’t where I need to be. The Zakharova is my home. New York is my home. *You* are my home. Besides,” she shrugs, “I never did save up enough to live in Moscow for a year.”

I chuckle. “You could always sell that Hermes gym bag you never use.”

“Okay, seriously, who uses a five-*fucking*-thousand-dollar gym—”

“Language.”

“Deal with it.”

“*Such* a fucking brat,” I groan, smiling at her.

She grins impishly as her lip catches in her teeth and her eyes lock with mine. “*Punish me for it later*?” she whispers quietly.

“Why wait?”

I grab her ass firmly and yank her tight against me. My hand cups her face, lifting it to mine.

“I love you,” I say.

“I love you, too,” she whispers back.

When my mouth sears to hers, there’s an explosion of cheers and claps, and I’m pretty sure I hear Val Bancroft crowing “B-D-E!”

Fuck it.

Call it chemistry.

Call it the stars aligning.

Call it Big Dick Energy.

Or maybe, just call it love.

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EPILOGUE

BROOKLYN

Eight Months Later:

"I'm fairly certain I said you weren't ever to come back here."

I roll my eyes as I wrap my arms around his waist and grin, looking up into his scowling, albeit gorgeous face.

"Yeah, but it isn't really the same."

Actually, the club isn't *at all* the same. The Mirage is now officially The Oasis, which is almost comically on point. Before, the "mirage" was exactly what it was: a place of false hope, promising a way out but really only dragging you further into the desert.

Now, it's a whole new place.

When Dimitri Moskovic pulled out of New York, as per his peace agreement with Kir, his intent was to close the club. After all, he only owned it because as a cash-heavy business, it was perfect for money laundering. And if he was moving back to Russia… What was the point?

That's when I stepped in with a different idea.

"I'm still not entirely sure how you convinced me to become the owner of a goddamn *strip club*," Kir grunts next to me.

I giggle, grinning. “Would you like a replay of how *exactly* I convinced you?”

His eyes flash as he smiles hungrily back at me. “*You know I would*.”

I flush as heat throbs in my core.

“Deal. But first, we *do* have to go in there. I mean, it *is* your place.”

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, on paper. All the headaches, none of the perks.”

“Good thing you love me, huh?”

He chuckles as his arm slides around my waist. “Good thing I do.”

Technically, on paper, Kir is the owner of The Oasis. But the real brains behind the operation, who will be running it once it’s officially open and reaping the income—and slowly paying Kir back at a very fair rate—is Maya.

And, like I said, things have changed around here.

There’s now a strict “no creeps” policy. Isaak ended up working with Maya to recruit and vet a seriously professional team of bouncers. Obviously, people come here for T&A. But there’s a fun, performative kind of strip club, and a sad, predatory kind.

This will be the fun kind, and Maya and her team will make sure of that.

The girls who work here now are all pros who, like Maya, genuinely love the gig—the costumes, the athleticism mixed with the erotic, and the *fun* that this kind of place can be when you remove the desperation.

Some of the girls who worked here before are still around, others have moved on. Caroline, for instance, now works for Kir in the acquisition wing of his empire.

Apparently, he was really impressed with her shrewd business tactics and her ability to stand her ground.

It’s also not *all* just stripper poles and lap dances around here anymore. Saturdays there's going to be burlesque performances, with a live band and everything.

Even cooler, the whole area is going to be changing soon. The mostly abandoned old warehouses and derelict buildings have been bought up by a consortium of Kir and a few other investors, and they're in the early stages of leveling all the old stuff so they can build new apartment buildings with ground floor retail space for bars, cool coffee spots, and more.

“Brooklyn!”

I turn and grin when I see Val walking over with Evelina and Dove.

“Hey!” I pull away from Kir to hug them all.

“M-Mr. Nikolayev,” Evie stammers, bowing in a hilariously formal way.

“Evelina,” he says in that deep voice of his, smiling. “For the last time, *Kir* is fine.”

Val gives Kir a firm handshake. “BDE. Good to see you, as always.”

Kir sighs and rolls his eyes. Val turns to look up at the new neon sign above the club.

“Who’s ready to see some titties?”

Kir chuckles deeply as I groan. Then I poke Val’s arm. “Hey, where’s—”

“On his way,” he says with a goofy smile. “Shall we?”

“Oh my God,” Evie blurts. “Did you guys see Inessa’s latest Insta post?”

Dove groans. “Unreal. That whole company is…beyond.”

Inessa, unsurprisingly, *did* end up getting the *Ballet Imperiya Korona* spot. We also ended up becoming pretty close in the few months she spent in New York before heading to Moscow.

I’m truly happy for her. I mean that.

Once upon a time, the *Imperiya Korona* was my dream. But I know now that that dream wasn’t so much the company itself, but the promise it whispered of pulling me out the reality I was drowning in.

But then my reality changed.

Because of him.

So when I say I'm happy for Inessa, and glad she's there, I *really* do mean it, and not in "smile and pretend" kind of way. *Ballet Imperiya Korona* is no longer my dream.

I'm living mine already.

And as impressive as that company is, I'm constantly reminded that the Zakharova is just as prestigious. As Maya once quipped, "the tits are always greener on the other side."

I don't need to go to Russia to understand how good I have it here. I have the Zakharova. I have my friends, who mean the world to me. I have *him*.

The rest is just…noise.

Marcus, the new head of security for The Oasis, grins as we walk up to the front door. "She's going to be so psyched to see you," he chuckles. He turns to nod at Kir, whom he apparently knows from doing some other jobs for him. "Mr. Nikolayev," he says stiffly.

"Oh, it's just Kir," Evie blurts.

Inside, my jaw *drops* as I take in the new space. The outside is relatively the same—though with a bit of a facelift. But the inside?

"Eeee! You're here!"

I whirl when I hear Maya's voice as she rushes over and gives me a huge hug.

"This *space*!" I gasp, looking around in wonder.

The entire interior has been redone to give a sultry, roaring twenties speakeasy vibe, complete with chandeliers dripping with crystals. It's done in deep reds, blacks, and golds, and instead of the creaky old tables sticky with beer, there are brand-new semicircular booths that all face the massive stage.

"Maya, it's *gorgeous*."

She grins before she glances up at Kir and smirks. “Speaking of gorgeous… How we doing, handsome?”

“Still no cousins or brothers that I know of,” he says with a chuckle.

Maya sighs. “Damn. Well, keep me posted.”

“Of course.”

She grins. “And again, even though I’ve said it a million times—”

“You don’t—”

“Yes, I *do*.” She puts her hand out and shakes his. “Thank you for this. Seriously.” She turns to beam at the rest of us. “Okay! We got some *prima ballerinas in the hooouse*! C’mon, I’ve got you guys up front in the splash zone.”

Evie looks confused. “Splash zone?”

Val, Dove, and I crack up. Kir makes a face.

“Better get that judgy look off your face,” I grin, elbowing him as we follow Maya to our table. “We’re going to be coming here *all* the time.”

“Is that so?” he says with a smirk, eying me.

“You know it.”

A cocktail waitress in a glittery gold corset and thigh-high boots brings over a tray of champagne flutes for the table. We all cheers just as the house lights dim.

Hoots and whistles and applause fill the club as Maya struts on stage and welcomes everyone to The Oasis before introducing the new lineup of dancers.

“…Plus a special welcome to an old friend who once used to grace this very stage,” Maya grins, patting the pole next to her as she looks right at me. “And her *very* generous other half.”

Applause fills the room as I turn to grin at Kir. “What do you think?” I wink. “Should I go back up there, you know, for old times’—”

I giggle as he reacts…well…*exactly* how you'd expect him to. He yanks me into his lap, clamping one hand over my thighs and the other arm around my waist in a possessive grip that pins me to him.

"I feel a mass casualty event would put a damper on Maya's soft opening," he growls.

I laugh as I cup his face and kiss him. "I think I'm good right here."

"Not good. *Perfect*," he murmurs.

The first two dancers strut on stage to a flurry of cheers and thrown cash. But my eyes are on his, and his on mine.

"I love you so much," I whisper.

"And I love *you*, little sinner."

Then my lips find his, and I kiss him with all that I am.

* * *

The Darkest Dance series continues with Roman & Val's (MM) story in
Dance of Defiance

Haven't gotten enough of Kir and Brooklyn?
Get their extra scene here, or type this link into your browser:
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This isn't an epilogue or continuation to *Dance of Devils.* But this extra hot "follow-up" story is guaranteed to keep the spice going.

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DANCE OF DECEPTION

Thank you so much for reading *Dance of Devils*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

As mentioned, the Darkest Dance series continues with Roman and Val's story in *Dance of Defiance*, a dark MM mafia romance.

If you'd like to catch up on some of the other characters mentioned in this book, though, you can also dive in to *Dance of Deception*, Carmine and Lyra's story. There's even a sneak peek of that book on the following pages for you.

Fair warning: bring your running shoes…

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.
www.jaggercolewrites.com

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Dance of Deception*.

* * *

Chapter 1
Lyra

Ballet isn’t art. It’s war disguised as grace.

“Again.”

Every muscle in my body is on the point of collapse, but Madame Kuzmina doesn’t care. She sits in her seat, dead center, four rows back from the stage, watching us like a hawk from the shadows beyond the lights, her fingers steepled under her chin.

Vaughn exhales sharply beside me, his jaw clenched. Brooklyn doesn’t bother holding back her groan. She collapses forward, hands on her knees, sucking in air like we’ve just run a marathon.

“We’ve done it four fucking times already,” she mutters under her breath.

Madame Kuzmina raises a single hand, glittering with rings, in a regal motion. She doesn’t need to raise her voice. Her stare alone is enough to suffocate.

“And now you will do it a fifth,” she says quietly in her Russian-tinged accent, “because the fourth was fucking *garbage*.”

Vaughn and I exchange a glance. His crystal blue eyes flicker with amusement, but I don’t return the smile. I'm too exhausted.

There’s no crying in baseball. And there sure as *shit* isn’t any smiling in ballet.

Brooklyn straightens with a sigh, smoothing a hand over her leotard. “Fifth time’s the charm?” she mutters.

We begin again, running through the *pas de trois*. My mind goes blank the way it always does when I dance—nothing but the music and the movement. Vaughn’s hands on my waist, firm but controlled, lifting me effortlessly. Brooklyn spinning into position beside us.

We run through the *entire* thing again before hitting our end position perfectly, Brooklyn and I on either side of Vaughn, and for the first time tonight, Madame Kuzmina doesn’t tell us to do it again.

Instead, she nods.

Once.

“That will do. For now.”

I hide the relief washing over me in a wave. Vaughn lets go of our hands with a dramatic groan, then flops onto his back at center stage, staring up at the ornate ceiling.

“Ballet is a fucking disease,” he announces to the air.

Brooklyn rolls her eyes and nudges his leg with her foot. “At least you get to wear flats.”

“Trust me, princess, you do not want to see me on pointe.”

Despite my exhaustion, I smile. Vaughn is chaos wrapped in infuriatingly incredible talent. When he's dancing, he moves with an effortless grace. Off stage he’s all sharp edges and wild energy, a stray dog that’s never been fully domesticated.

Madame Kuzmina rises to her feet, rearranging the silk draped over her arms. “We begin again at nine tomorrow. Arrive warmed up and ready to go.”

With that, she wraps her shawl around herself like Maleficent’s robes and melts up the darkened aisle of the Mercury Opera House, disappearing into the shadows. There’s a brief flicker of light as the door to the lobby opens and then closes again.

Naomi appears at the edge of the stage, twirling her water bottle in one hand and nodding in the direction Madame Kuzmina has gone. “Such a ray of fucking sunshine,” she deadpans.

Vaughn rolls onto his stomach. “And yet she loves me.”

Brooklyn snorts. “She tolerates you.”

Vaughn winks, pushing himself up. “Tolerates, loves, same difference.”

I shake my head and turn toward the wings, heading for the dressing room. My legs ache, and even my skin feels tired. I need a hot shower and about fourteen hours of sleep.

The dressing room is empty, since the rehearsal day was done long ago. But Madame decided to focus her keen eye on Brooklyn, Vaughn, and I and had us stay late, since we're the ones performing the pas de trois in *Swan Lake*, which the Zakharova will be performing in a few months' time.

Naomi follows me in, already undoing her bun. She's our Odette/Odile, aka, Swan Queen, for the upcoming performance. And her reason for staying late has nothing to do with Madame Kuzmina and everything to do with *herself*.

No matter how many times you tell Naomi she's amazing, she refuses to listen. I swear, the girl drinks imposter syndrome smoothies for breakfast.

"Tell me you're coming out with us this weekend," she coaxes, leaning against her locker. "Or are you going to pretend you have an exciting social life when we both know you don't?"

I smirk. "Tempting, but I need sleep more than overpriced cocktails."

As if I could *afford* overpriced cocktails. Or reasonably priced ones. Actually, even happy hour pricing might be off the table given my current financial situation.

Naomi groans. "You're such a grandma."

Brooklyn drops onto the bench beside me. "I might actually be dead by the weekend," she mutters. "Kuzmina is a fucking sadist."

"I think the word you're looking for is *Russian.*" Naomi grins.

Vaughn appears in the doorway, shoving his fingers through his shaggy dark hair. "Personally, I like my women with a touch of organized crime."

Brooklyn makes a face. "You would. And get *out*, dude. Guys' dressing room is down the hall, in case you've forgotten."

"But I get so lonely all by myself." He grins smugly before he peels off his t-shirt and slings it over his shoulder.

Vaughn has the sort of body that can only be described as "sinful". The motherfucker has like zero percent body fat, is freaking *ripped*, and is covered in strategically placed tattoos. Coupled with his Mediterranean skin

tone and vaguely Italian looks, it's easy to see why his social calendar is perpetually filled—with dates with both sexes, I should add.

Vaughn strolls over to a locker and opens it before he turns to wink at Brooklyn. "You know I keep a second locker with my shit in here. And relax, it's not like any of you are my type."

He starts to take off his tights. Yeah, that's my cue to turn around and avert my eyes. Sinful body or not, Vaughn's and my relationship—pretty much his relationship with any of the girls in the company—is more sibling-like than anything else.

Brooklyn snorts as she peels off her own tights and leotard and replaces them with underwear and yoga pants.

"I thought that your 'type' was 'has a pulse and at least one willing hole'."

"Pulses are overrated," he grins.

"*Dude*," Brooklyn makes sour face and shakes her head.

Vaughn laughs as he turns around, now at least wearing boxers. "Like you'd ever let me near you, baby girl."

Brooklyn wrinkles her nose as she tosses on a hoodie. "Gross?"

Vaughn shrugs. "The feeling is mutual, and I say that with love. No, what I mean is, I don't play hard to get. If someone doesn't want me, I'm already gone. You want this…?"

The three of us collectively roll our eyes as he runs a finger down his ludicrously defined abs and cups his dick through his boxers.

"You have to show me you want it."

"Yeah, hard pass, *friendo*," Brooklyn says dryly.

"Again, the feeling is entirely mutual, baby girl."

I giggle, turning to haul my dance bag out of my locker. I wriggle out of my leotard and wrap a towel around myself getting ready to shower, then dig through the bag, fingers searching for my MetroCard. But all I find are a few loose quarters and a crumpled one-dollar bill.

Shit. Not enough for the subway home.

I press my lips together and force the knot of frustration down.

I reach for my water bottle, catching my reflection in the mirror hanging on the inside of the locker door. My brow furrows, my gaze lingering on the way my collarbones are more prominent than they were a few months ago.

“Here.”

I jolt, turning at the sound of Naomi’s voice. She doesn’t make a big deal out of it, but passes me a granola bar.

“I’m good.”

My friend cocks one brow. “I don’t want it,” she says evenly. “So—take it.” Her eyes stay on mine. “And *eat it*,” she adds quietly.

I smile wryly as I peel open the wrapper, taking a small nibble. Naomi doesn’t know everything about my life, but she knows enough to see when things are…slipping.

Like me, Naomi is making it work by herself on her dancer's salary, somehow. The difference is, she’s got a safety net if she *really* needs it. You’d have to stick a gun to her head before she'd call her congressman father to ask for help. But the option is there.

For me, it's not. My safety net was gone long before the monster who was my father bled out in a prison cell.

Brooklyn and Vaughn are talking loudly about Kir Nikolayev, the very enigmatic Bratva kingpin who owns and bankrolls the Zakharova Ballet… specifically, how “fuckable” he is…when Naomi and I leave them and trudge to the showers.

The ache of the extra-long day melts just a little as the hot water pours down over me.

“Hey… You’re good, right?”

I turn to glance over at Naomi, who’s rinsing off at the next showerhead.

I know what she means.

“Yeah, I’m…fine.”

She pushes her long, dark hair out of her face and gives me a piercing look. “For real?”

I exhale. “Yeah, it’s just…” I shake my head. “I’m starting to wonder if school on top of this is too much.”

Between the credits I got for advanced classes in high school, and the college courses I took a few years ago, I’m about two-thirds of the way to a degree in human psychology. The lofty goal is that when ballet eventually ends—whenever that is—I’ll try my luck at the MCATs and med school, and try to become a clinical psychiatrist.

Hey, I *did* say “lofty”.

Naomi exhales as she turns to rinse off her back. “Yeah, pre-med *does* sound like a lot on top of this, even part time.” She glances at me, her brow still cocked. “Is that all?”

Goddammit, this girl always sees right through me.

“Vera’s been gambling again.”

She groans. “Are you fucking serious? I thought your mom was banned from every casino and racetrack in the state.”

“Yeah, well, she must’ve found *someone* who lets her place bets through them.”

“Shit.” Naomi frowns. “Look, I know you hate—”

“We’ll be fine,” I smile as I turn the water off. “But thanks for the offer.”

She nods, not pushing it.

Vaughn and Brooklyn are already dressed and somehow *still* talking about Kir’s “big dick energy” when we get back from the showers. I pull on yoga pants and a hoodie before I remember the lack of means to get home tonight. I wince as I glance at Naomi.

“Hey, you wouldn’t have a spare MetroCard on you, would you?”

Naomi’s eyes flick toward my bag, where the pitiful collection of change still sits in the front pocket. She doesn’t comment on it, just reaches into her wallet and pulls out her MetroCard, pressing it into my palm.

“Just take it. I’ll grab a cab with Vaughn.”

“Are you sure?”

She snorts. “Yeah, because I *love* the subway at midnight.” She shoulders her dance bag and gives me a pointed look. “Text me when you get home, please.”

Vaughn stretches dramatically, slinging an arm around Naomi’s shoulders as he leads her toward the door. “My chariot awaits, milady.” He sticks a cigarette between his lips, making Naomi squint.

“You light that thing anywhere near me and I’m going to knee you in the balls.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, girl.”

The door swings shut behind them, leaving only silence.

Brooklyn is still sitting on the bench, one leg tucked under her, absentmindedly running a finger over the edge of her pointe shoe ribbon. The tension in her body from the exhausting rehearsal has shifted to something else.

She doesn’t look at me when she finally speaks.

“You ever think about how much this actually costs us?”

I frown as I throw my gingery-red hair into a messy bun. “What? Ballet?”

She exhales sharply, shaking her head. “Not just ballet. This life. The work, all the training, the barely-there paycheck.” She glances at me, one brow lifting. “We kill ourselves every day for what? The honor of being underpaid and having a career that's over before it's even begun?”

Brooklyn’s like me: making her dance dream work on her own. No safety net.

I don’t answer right away. Truth is, I have thought about it. Every single time I pull together enough cash for rent but not groceries. Every time I ache all over but know I’ll still be back at the barre the next morning.

Brooklyn clears her throat. “Look, I understand pride, Lyra. And I’m not going to insult you by asking if you want a loan or anything. But…” The corners of her lips curl as she reaches into her bag.

My jaw drops as she pulls out a *gangster*-sized wad of cash.

“If you *do* need money…”

I blink at the thick stack of crisp hundreds, folded neatly. More cash than I’ve seen in…ever.

“What the fuck, Brooklyn?”

She smirks. “Relax. I didn’t rob a bank.”

I tear my gaze away from the money, forcing my voice to stay level. “Then where…?”

She exhales slowly. “Remember that charity thing where we did that excerpt from *Giselle* last month?”

Occasionally, mostly because it *always* results in new benefactors with deep pockets, select members of the company will perform at things like the Policemen’s Ball or other charity events.

Brooklyn clears her throat. “Well, after we were done, this guy came up to me and said he had a dance gig I might be interested in. He said he couldn’t tell me much about it, but that it paid insanely well. And… I took it. That’s where this money came from.”

A strange prickle works its way down my spine.

Brooklyn must notice the change on my face, because she quickly shakes her head. “Look, it’s not stripping or anything. No one touches you—no one even speaks to you. And you’re wearing clothes. But it pays way better than this.” She gestures vaguely around us at the dressing room. “It’s also secret.”

The word makes something inside me tighten.

Secret is never good. Secret always comes at a price.

“What do you mean, *secret*?”

Brooklyn twists the ends of her hoodie strings around her finger. “It’s like a private club or something. They pick you up at a location they decide, blindfold you, and drive you there.”

My jaw drops.

“Are you fucking serious? Brooklyn, that’s super sketch!”

She huffs a quiet laugh. “Yeah, I thought so too, at first.”

I narrow my eyes. “*At first*?”

She shrugs. “It wasn’t as bad as I thought. You change in a dressing room, where the blindfold comes off. There were six other girls—all dancers.”

“And then?”

Brooklyn exhales, her voice quieter now. “They give us fresh blindfolds, masks, and earbuds that play music synced with a voice directing us. Someone took us all out to a performance space, and—we danced.”

I don’t like how that makes my skin prickle.

“For how many people?”

She shakes her head. “No idea. I never saw them. Never heard them. But they were there, I could feel it.”

I swallow thickly.

What the fuck.

She holds up the wad of money, her brow cocking significantly. “Lyra, they pay five fucking grand for *four hours*.”

My stomach lurches.

Five. Thousand. Dollars.

That’s rent, food, security. That’s a way out from the hole my mother seems to be completely hellbent on in digging us into.

Brooklyn watches me carefully. “Listen… again, I get pride, Lyra. But I saw you counting coins…” She lifts her shoulders. “They said they might be looking for more dancers. So if you wanted…”

I shiver, feeling the invitation linger between us like a lit fuse. I swallow, eying the money in her hand.

“Look, for now…” She hands me two twenties. “Will you just take a cab home? Seriously, the subway is dangerous this late. Please? And if you’re interested in the job… Here's the number for my contact.” She finds an entry on her phone and texts it to me.

Pride wants me to refuse the money politely.

Common sense and the prospect of spending hours underground with my fingers wrapped around my keys wins out.

“Thanks,” I say quietly, taking the money. “Seriously, thank you. I’ll pay you back.”

* * *

The night air is crisp, biting at my skin as I pull my hoodie tighter around me.

“Wanna just share my Uber?” Brooklyn nods at the car waiting at the top of the alley behind the theater.

I exhale. “Maybe, actually.” I shoot her a wry smile. “I feel like you’re pampering me tonight.”

She giggles. “I mean, *yeah*. You’re my girl. C’mon.”

I start to follow her. When I slip my hand into my hoodie pocket, I groan.

“Shit.”

Brooklyn glances back. “What’s up?”

My face droops. “I left my phone in the dressing room.” I shake my head. “You know what? Go ahead. You already gave me money for a cab. I’ll just do that.”

She frowns. “Don’t be silly. I’ll wait for you.”

“Nah, go get your ride. It’s late. But thanks. And…for earlier.”

“Anytime, girl. See you tomorrow for more Russian gulag conditioning?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I groan.

I watch as she tugs her coat around herself, scampers up the alley, and slips into the waiting vehicle, red taillights disappearing into the night.

The door hisses shut behind me as I duck back into the warmth of the dim, silent ballet theater. My steps are quick as I make my way toward the dressing room.

It only takes a minute to find my phone and I stuff it into my hoodie pocket, shaking my head before slipping back outside.

This time, the door clicks shut behind me with finality.

The street is mostly empty now, the occasional honk of a distant car the only sound. The alley behind the Mercury splits halfway up to the street: continuing straight puts you onto Madison Avenue, which runs one-way north: perfect for Brooklyn, who lives up toward Harlem. But if I take the left-handed side-cut out of the alley, it’ll dump me on East 49th Street, where it's easier to get a cab going *downtown*, to the apartment I, unfortunately, share with my mother in Hell's Kitchen.

I ignore the creepy sensation that being here at midnight always brings as I hustle up the alley. I’m just about to turn the corner and head out to East 49th when I hear voices.

Low. Rough. Male.

I freeze.

The words are hushed, but I can still hear them. A weird shiver ripples up my spine as I do.

“What are you doing here? Bianca got out of rehearsal hours ago.”

The first voice is rough-sounding, deep, and somewhat frightening, with a dangerous edge to it.

My stomach knots at Bianca’s name.

Bianca got out of rehearsal hours ago.

Bianca as in Bianca Barone—well, Bianca *Drakos* now that she’s married—who's in the Zakharova with me. She’s an *incredible* dancer, super sweet, and is the youngest daughter in the Barone Italian mafia family.

I suck in a breath, pressing my back against the brick wall, forcing myself deeper into the shadows.

“No shit. I’m not here for her,” a second man growls. “What are *you* doing here, you psycho?” His voice is deep and dark, too, but also edged in something savage and viciously alluring, like a blade dragging down my spine or a dark promise whispered in my ear.

The first guy exhales sharply, irritated. “It was stupid and reckless for Matteo to hire her.”

My pulse hammers.

Her who?

“She dances *here*,” the first guy growls. “She’s friends with people like your sister. She could talk—”

“She was blindfolded, you dumb fuck,” the second man snaps. “And just what was your plan, exactly?”

The first man huffs out a breath. “I was just going to scare her a little,” he rumbles. “Remind her that the money she was paid ensures silence.”

Something inside me goes cold as things fall into place. I’m pretty sure they’re talking about *Brooklyn.*

The second man’s voice sharpens. “Stay the fuck away from where my sister dances, understand?”

There’s a tense, prolonged pause.

“Fine.” A slow exhale, like a forced truce.

“Is that a *yes* fine, or an *I’m blowing smoke up your ass* fine.”

“It’s a yes fine, calm down,” the first guy grunts. “Anyway, in unrelated news, Mushkin hasn’t responded to our summons.”

The second guy—the one with authority in his voice, the one who's driving the conversation—lets out a dark chuckle. “People rarely actually respond to a Black Court summons.”

I shrink further against the wall.

“They respond in behavior, at least,” the first guy mutters. “Mushkin hasn’t hired more security, fled, moved money. None of it. His schedule is still clear for the night of the trial, though.”

“You know how it is,” the second guy says, his voice smoother now. “Sometimes they’re so confident that they show up willingly.”

The first guy laughs, low and dark. “And if not…” He pauses, amusement dripping from his voice. “Then we get the fun of hunting them down before we even get to the chase.”

A slow shiver slides down my spine.

“Reach out to The Wolf and The Stag,” the second man orders. “Let them know the status on Mushkin. The Black Court will meet as planned.”

The Wolf? The Stag?

The *Black Court*?

Nothing about this conversation makes sense.

The sound of footsteps grows louder. They’re splitting up. I panic, pressing myself deeper into the shadows, willing my body to melt into the cold brick.

Then I flinch, freezing in place as a figure rounds the corner and suddenly looms over me.

Tall. Menacing. Powerful.

Suddenly, I'm looking straight into the cold, piercing blue eyes of Carmine Barone.

My stomach drops.

I've seen him before—either dropping off or picking up Bianca, or sometimes at performances or some of those charity events. But this is different.

Up close, he's even more intense than he is at a distance. This near, he radiates raw power—and something darker, coiled beneath the surface, waiting to strike like a lethal, venomous snake. He's wearing a dark suit and an open pea-coat, molded to his broad shoulders and powerful arms like a suit of armor.

It's like black lightning striking from the shadows. Before I can even blink, his hand is suddenly on my throat, his fingers wrapping around it and settling against my jugular. It's not a choke—just a warning. A display of his strength. His power.

His control.

My breath catches.

"I—I didn't hear anything," I whisper, the words tumbling out too fast, too desperate.

His grip tightens slightly but he says nothing for a moment, those cold blue eyes piercing into me like knives, as if he's flaying open my very soul to peer inside and feast on what he finds.

His thumb traces over my pulse. "No one asked you about anything you may or may not have heard."

A tremor ripples through my body, my eyes widening even further.

"Who *are* you?" he finally murmurs darkly, his voice low, focused, and almost sensual in the way it teases over my skin.

My heart thunders in my chest and my throat works against his hand.

“N-nobody,” I whisper again. “I’m nobody.”

Carmine’s lips curl, something between a smirk and a snarl.

“Nobody…” he muses.

His grip lingers, his fingers still firm around my throat, pressing just enough that I can feel the subtle pressure against my pulse. A test. A game.

A reminder that he could crush me if he wanted to.

His thumb moves slightly, stroking the base of my throat like he’s considering something. My skin burns where he touches me, body locked in place, muscles coiled tight. I don’t flinch. I don’t dare.

His head tilts, studying me like I’m something strange and unexpected.

“What did you hear?” His voice is a low rasp.

I shake my head as much as his grip allows. “Nothing,” I breathe.

Carmine hums, unconvinced. “Nothing?”

I gulp. “I-I was just leaving the theater. I didn’t—I wasn’t paying attention.”

His grip tightens for a second, just enough to make my pulse spike against his hand before he eases up again. “Funny,” he murmurs. “People who’ve heard nothing don’t usually look this scared.”

I open my mouth, then close it again, forcing my breathing to stay even. He’s testing me, waiting to see if I’ll break.

I can’t do that.

Men like him eat weakness for breakfast.

My fingers clench into fists at my sides. “You… You startled me, is all.”

“If this is *startled*, I’d love to see what it looks like when you’re *truly* scared.”

He says it like a desire. Like he’s already thinking about getting off to the idea of my fear.

Carmine watches me for a beat longer. Then, finally, he lets go. I suck in a breath, my skin prickling where his hand was on my throat, the ghost of his touch lingering like a brand.

He takes a slow step back, his sharp blue gaze never leaving mine.

“Well, Miss Nobody who heard nothing,” he murmurs, his lips curling into an amused and cruel almost-smile. “Let’s hope it stays that way.”

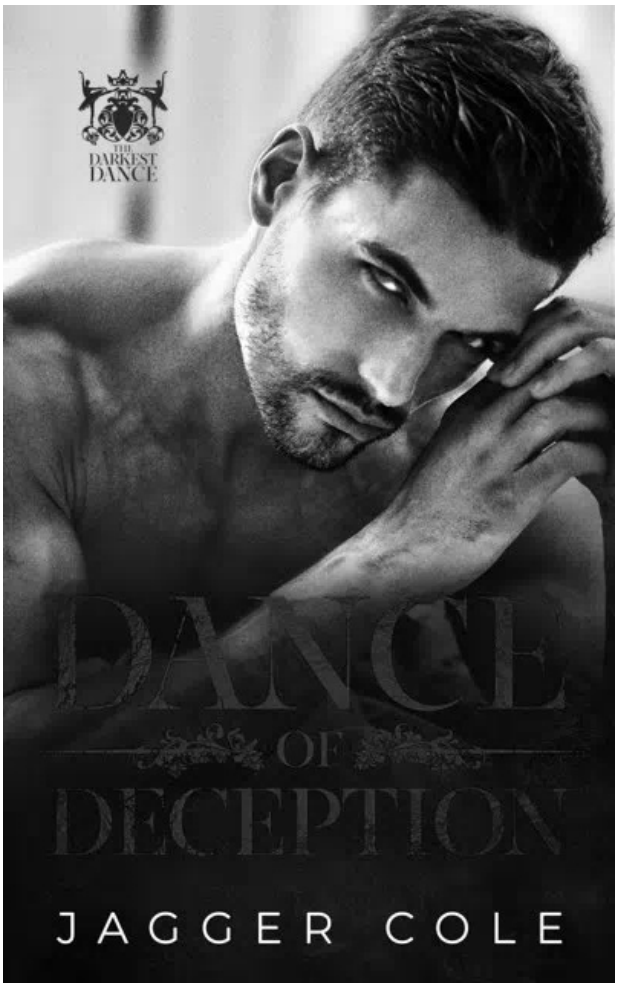
And then, just as quickly as he appeared, he’s gone, and the alley is silent once more.

The air feels heavy, charged, like the ghost of him is still standing there, watching me.

I don’t move. I don’t breathe.

Then my legs finally unlock and I’m able to stumble forward, pulse still hammering, his words pressing heavily on my spine and dragging over my skin like hot knives.

Keep reading!



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Stalker of Mine

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at
www.jaggercolewrites.com

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